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THE RIDDLE
AND OTHER STORIES

By the same Author

Poetry

THE LISTENERS and other Poems
PEACOCK PIE: A Book of Rhymes
MOTLEY and other Poems
POEMS 1901-1918
A CHILD'S DAY
SONGS OF CHILDHOOD
THE VEIL and other Poems
DOWN A DOWN DERRY

Prose

HENRY BROCKEN
THE RETURN
THE THREE MULLA MULGARS
MEMOIRS OF A MIDGET

STORY & RHYME

THE RIDDLE
AND OTHER STORIES
BY
WALTER DE LA MARE

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TO RUSSELL LOINES

*"This communicating of a man's self to
his friend . . . redoubleth joys, and cutteth
griefs in halfs."*

THE ALMOND TREE

My old friend, "the Count" as we used to call him, made very strange acquaintances at times. Let but a man have plausibility, a point of view, a crotchet, an enthusiasm, he would find in him an eager and exhilarating listener. And though he was often deceived and disappointed in his finds, the Count had a heart proof against lasting disillusionment. I confess, however, that these planetary cronies of his were rather disconcerting at times. And I own that meeting him one afternoon in the busy High Street, with a companion on his arm even more than usually voluble and odd—I own I crossed the road to avoid meeting the pair.

But the Count's eyes had been too sharp for me. He twitted me unmercifully with my snobbishness. "I am afraid we must have appeared to avoid you to-day," he said ; and received my protestations with contemptuous indifference.

But the next afternoon we took a walk together over the heath ; and perhaps the sunshine, something in the first freshness of the May weather, reminded him of bygone days.

"You remember that rather out-of-the-world friend of mine yesterday that so shocked your spruce proprieties, Richard ? Well, I'll tell you a story."

As closely as I can recall this story of the Count's childhood I have here related it. I wish, though, I had my old friend's gift for such things ; then, perhaps, his story might retain something of the charm in the reading which he gave to it in the

telling. Perhaps that charm lies wholly in the memory of his voice, his companionship, his friendship. To revive these, what task would be a burden? . . .

"The house of my first remembrance, the house that to my last hour on earth will seem home to me, stood in a small green hollow on the verge of a wide heath. Its five upper windows faced far eastwards towards the weather-cocked tower of a village which rambled down the steep inclination of a hill. And, walking in its green old garden—ah, Richard, the crocuses, the wallflowers, the violets!—you could see in the evening the standing fields of corn, and the dark furrows where the evening star was stationed; and a little to the south, upon a crest, a rambling wood of fir-trees and bracken.

"The house, the garden, the deep quiet orchard, all had been a wedding gift to my mother from a great-aunt, a very old lady in a kind of turban, whose shrewd eyes used to watch me out of her picture sitting in my high cane chair at meal-times—with not a little keenness; sometimes, I fancied, with a faint derision. Here passed by, to the singing of the lark, and the lamentation of autumn wind and rain, the first long nine of all these heaped-up inextricable years. Even now, my heart leaps up with longing to see again with those untutored eyes the lofty clouds of evening; to hear again as then I heard it the two small notes of the yellow-hammer piping from his green spray. I remember every room of the old house, the steep stairs, the cool apple-scented pantry; I remember the cobbles by the scullery, the well, my old dead raven, the bleak

and whistling elms ; but best of all I remember the unmeasured splendour of the heath, with its gorse, and its deep canopy of sunny air, the haven of every wild bird of the morning.

"Martha Rodd was a mere prim snippet of a maid then, pale and grave, with large contemplative, Puritan eyes. Mrs. Ryder, in her stiff blue martial print and twisted gold brooch, was cook. And besides these, there was only old Thomas the gardener (as out-of-doors, and as distantly seen a creature as a dryad) ; my mother ; and that busy-minded little boy, agog in wits and stomach and spirit—myself. For my father seemed but a familiar guest in the house, a guest ever eagerly desired and welcome, but none too eager to remain. He was a dark man with grey eyes and a long chin ; a face unusually impassive, unusually mobile. Just as his capricious mood suggested, our little household was dejected or wildly gay. I never shall forget the spirit of delight he could conjure up at a whim, when my mother would go singing up and down stairs, and in her tiny parlour ; and Martha in perfect content would prattle endlessly on to the cook, basting the twirling sirloin, while I watched in the firelight. And the long summer evenings too, when my father would find a secret, a magic, a mystery in everything ; and we would sit together in the orchard while he told me tales, with the small green apples overhead, and beyond contorted branches, the first golden twilight of the moon.

"It's an old picture now, Richard, but true to the time.

"My father's will, his word, his caprice, his frown, these were the tables of the law in that small household. To my mother he was the very meaning of her life. Only that little boy was in some wise independent, busy, inquisitive, docile, sedate ; though urged to a bitterness of secret rebellion at times. In his childhood he experienced such hours of distress as the years do not in mercy bring again to a heart that may analyse as well as remember. Yet there also sank to rest the fountain of life's happiness. In among the gorse bushes were the green mansions of the fairies ; along the furrows before his adventurous eyes stumbled crooked gnomes, hopped bewitched robins. Ariel trebled in the sunbeams and glanced from the dewdrops ; and he heard the echo of distant and magic waters in the falling of the rain.

"But my father was never long at peace in the house. Nothing satisfied him ; he must needs be at an extreme. And if he was compelled to conceal his discontent, there was something so bitter and imperious in his silence, so scornful a sarcasm in his speech, that we could scarcely bear it. And the knowledge of the influence he had over us served only at such times to sharpen his contempt.

"I remember one summer's evening we had been gathering strawberries. I carried a little wicker basket, and went rummaging under the aromatic leaves, calling ever and again my mother to see the 'tremenjous' berry I had found. Martha was busy beside me, vexed that her two hands could not serve her master quick enough. And in a wild race with my mother my father helped us pick. At every

ripest one he took her in his arms to force it between her lips ; and of all those pecked by the birds he made a rhymed offering to Pan. And when the sun had descended behind the hill, and the clamour of the rooks had begun to wane in the elm-tops, he took my mother on his arm, and we trooped all together up the long straggling path, and across the grass, carrying our spoil of fruit into the cool dusky corridor. As we passed into the gloaming I saw my mother stoop impulsively and kiss his arm. He brushed off her hand impatiently, and went into his study. I heard the door shut. A moment afterwards he called for candles. And, looking on those two other faces in the twilight, I knew with the intuition of childhood that he was suddenly sick to death of us all ; and I knew that my mother shared my intuition. She sat down, and I beside her, in her little parlour, and took up her sewing. But her face had lost again all its girlishness as she bent her head over the white linen.

"I think she was happier when my father was away ; for then, free from anxiety to be for ever pleasing his variable moods, she could entertain herself with hopes and preparations for his return. There was a little green summer-house, or arbour, in the garden, where she would sit alone, while the swallows coursed in the evening air. Sometimes, too, she would take me for a long walk, listening distantly to my chatter, only, I think, that she might entertain the pleasure of supposing that my father might have returned home unforeseen, and be even now waiting to greet us. But these fancies would

forsake her. She would speak harshly and coldly to me, and scold Martha for her owlishness, and find nothing but vanity and mockery in all that but a little while since had been her day-dream.

"I think she rarely knew where my father stayed in his long absences from home. He would remain with us for a week, and neglect us for a month. She was too proud, and when he was himself, too happy and hopeful to question him, and he seemed to delight in keeping his affairs secret from her. Indeed, he sometimes appeared to pretend a mystery where none was, and to endeavour in all things to make his character and conduct appear quixotic and inexplicable.

"So time went on. Yet, it seemed, as each month passed by, the house was not so merry and happy as before ; something was fading and vanishing that would not return ; estrangement had pierced a little deeper. I think care at last put out of my mother's mind even the semblance of her former gaiety. She sealed up her heart lest love should break forth anew into the bleakness.

"On Guy Fawkes' Day Martha told me at bed-time that a new household had moved into the village on the other side of the heath. After that my father stayed away from us but seldom.

"At first my mother showed her pleasure in a thousand ways, with dainties of her own fancy and cooking, with ribbons in her dark hair, with new songs (though she had but a small thin voice). She read to please him ; and tired my legs out in useless errands in his service. And a word of praise sufficed her for many hours of difficulty. But bye-and-bye,

when evening after evening was spent by my father away from home, she began to be uneasy and depressed ; and though she made no complaint, her anxious face, the incessant interrogation of her eyes vexed and irritated him beyond measure.

" 'Where does my father go after dinner ?' I asked Martha one night, when my mother was in my bedroom, folding my clothes.

" 'How dare you ask such a question ?' said my mother, 'and how dare you talk to the child about your master's comings and goings ?'

" 'But where does he ?' I repeated to Martha, when my mother was gone out of the room.

" 'Ssh now, Master Nicholas,' she answered, 'didn't you hear what your mamma said ? She's vexed, poor lady, at master's never spending a whole day at home, but nothing but them cards, cards, cards, every night at Mr. Grey's. Why, often it's twelve and one in the morning when I've heard his foot on the gravel beneath the window. But there, I'll be bound, she doesn't *mean* to speak unkindly. It's a terrible scourge is jealousy, Master Nicholas ; and not generous or manly to give it cause. Mrs. Ryder was kept a widow all along of jealousy, and but a week before her wedding with her second.'

" 'But why is mother jealous of my father playing cards ?'

"Martha slipped my nightgown over my head. 'Ssh, Master Nicholas, little boys mustn't ask so many questions. And I hope when you are grown up to be a man, my dear, you will be a comfort to your mother. She needs it, poor soul, and sakes

alive, just now of all times !' I looked inquisitively into Martha's face ; but she screened my eyes with her hand ; and instead of further questions, I said my prayers to her.

"A few days after this I was sitting with my mother in her parlour, holding her grey worsted for her to wind, when my father entered the room and bade me put on my hat and muffler. 'He is going to pay a call with me,' he explained curtly. As I went out of the room, I heard my mother's question, 'To your friends at the Grange, I suppose ?'

"You may suppose whatever you please,' he answered. I heard my mother rise to leave the room, but he called her back and the door was shut. . . .

"The room in which the card-players sat was very low-ceiled. A piano stood near the window, a rose-wood table with a fine dark crimson work-basket upon it by the fireside, and some little distance away, a green card-table with candles burning. Mr. Grey was a slim, elegant man, with a high, narrow forehead and long fingers. Major Aubrey was a short, red-faced, rather taciturn man. There was also a younger man with fair hair. They seemed to be on the best of terms together ; and I helped to pack the cards and to pile the silver coins, sipping a glass of sherry with Mr. Grey. My father said little, paying me no attention, but playing gravely with a very slight frown.

"After some little while the door opened, and a lady appeared. This was Mr. Grey's sister, Jane, I learned. She seated herself at her work-table, and drew me to her side.

"Well, so this is Nicholas!" she said. "Or is it Nick?"
"Nicholas," I said.

"Of course," she said, smiling, "and I like that too, much the best. How very kind of you to come to see me! It was to keep *me* company, you know, because I am very stupid at games, but I love talking. Do you?"

"I looked into her eyes, and knew we were friends. She smiled again, with open lips, and touched my mouth with her thimble. "Now, let me see, business first, and—me afterwards. You see I have three different kinds of cake, because, I thought, I cannot in the least tell which kind he'll like best. Could I now? Come, you shall choose."

"She rose and opened the long door of a narrow cupboard, looking towards the card-players as she stooped. I remember the cakes to this day; little oval shortbreads stamped with a beehive, custards and mince-pies; and a great glass jar of goodies which I carried in both arms round the little square table. I took a mince-pie, and sat down on a foot-stool near by Miss Grey, and she talked to me while she worked with slender hands at her lace embroidery. I told her how old I was; about my great-aunt and her three cats. I told her my dreams, and that I was very fond of Yorkshire pudding, 'from under the meat, you know.' And I told her I thought my father the handsomest man I had ever seen.

"What, handsomer than Mr. Spencer?" she said laughing, looking along her needle.

"I answered that I did not very much like clergymen.

" 'And why ?' she said gravely.

" 'Because they do not talk like real,' I said.

" She laughed very gaily. ' Do men ever ?' she said.

" And her voice was so quiet and so musical, her neck so graceful, I thought her a very beautiful lady, admiring especially her dark eyes when she smiled brightly and yet half sadly at me ; I promised, moreover, that if she would meet me on the heath, I would show her the rabbit warren and the 'Miller's Pool.'

" 'Well, Jane, and what do you think of my son ?'

said my father when we were about to leave.

" She bent over me and squeezed a lucky four-penny-piece into my hand. ' I love fourpence, pretty little fourpence, I love fourpence better than my life,' she whispered into my ear. ' But that's a secret,' she added, glancing up over her shoulder. She kissed lightly the top of my head. I was looking at my father while she was caressing me. and I fancied a faint sneer passed over his face. But when we had come out of the village on to the heath, in the bare keen night, as we walked along the path together between the gorse-bushes, now on turf, and now on stony ground, never before had he seemed so wonderful a companion. He told me little stories ; he began a hundred, and finished none ; yet with the stars above us, they seemed a string of beads all of bright colours. We stood still in the vast darkness, while he whistled that strangest of all old songs — 'the Song the Sirens sang.' He pilfered my wits and talked like my double. But when—how much too quickly, I thought with sinking heart—we were

come to the house-gates, he suddenly fell silent, turned an instant, and stared far away over the windy heath.

"How weary, stale, flat——" he began, and broke off between uneasy laughter and a sigh. "Listen to me, Nicholas," he said, lifting my face to the starlight, "you must grow up a man—a Man, you understand; no vapourings, no posings, no caprices; and above all, no sham. No sham. It's your one and only chance in this unfaltering Scheme." He scanned my face long and closely. "You have your mother's eyes," he said musingly. "And that," he added under his breath, "*that's* no joke." He pushed open the squealing gate, and we went in.

"My mother was sitting in a low chair before a dying and cheerless fire.

"Well, Nick," she said very suavely, "and how have you enjoyed your evening?"

"I stared at her without answer. "Did you play cards with the gentlemen; or did you turn over the music?"

"I talked to Miss Grey," I said.

"Really," said my mother, raising her eyebrows, "and who then is Miss Grey?" My father was smiling at us with sparkling eyes.

"Mr. Grey's sister," I answered in a low voice.

"Not his wife, then?" said my mother, glancing furtively at the fire. I looked towards my father in doubt, but could lift my eyes no higher than his knees.

"You little fool!" he said to my mother with a laugh, "what a sharpshooter! Never mind, Sir Nick; there, run off to bed, my man."

"My mother caught me roughly by the sleeve as I was passing her chair. 'Aren't you going to kiss me good-night, then,' she said furiously, her narrow under-lip quivering, 'you too !' I kissed her cheek. 'That's right, my dear,' she said scornfully, 'that's how little fishes kiss.' She rose and drew back her skirts. 'I refuse to stay in the room,' she said haughtily, and with a sob she hurried out.

"My father continued to smile, but only a smile it seemed gravity had forgotten to smooth away. He stood very still, so still that I grew afraid he must certainly hear me thinking. Then with a kind of sigh he sat down at my mother's writing table, and scribbled a few words with his pencil on a slip of paper.

"There, Nicholas, just tap at your mother's door with that. Good-night, old fellow'; he took my hand and smiled down into my eyes with a kind of generous dark appeal that called me straight to his side. I hastened conceitedly upstairs, and delivered my message. My mother was crying when she opened the door.

"Well ?' she said in a low, trembling voice.

"But presently afterwards, while I was still lingering in the dark corridor, I heard her run down quickly, and in a while my father and mother came upstairs together, arm in arm, and by her light talk and laughter you might suppose she had no knowledge of care or trouble at all.

"Never afterwards did I see so much gaiety and youthfulness in my mother's face as when she sat next morning with us at breakfast. The honeycomb,

the small bronze chrysanthemums, her yellow gown seemed dainty as a miniature. With every word her eyes would glance covertly at my father ; her smile, as it were, hesitating between her lashes. She was so light and girlish and so versatile I should scarcely have recognised the weary and sallow face of the night before. My father seemed to find as much pleasure, or relief, in her good spirits as I did ; and to delight in exercising his ingenuity to quicken her humour.

It was but a transient morning of sunshine, however, and as the brief and sombre day waned, its gloom pervaded the house. In the evening my father left us to our solitude as usual. And that night was very misty over the heath, with a small, warm rain falling.

"So it happened that I began to be left more and more to my own devices, and grew so inured at last to my own narrow company and small thoughts and cares, that I began to look on my mother's unhappiness almost with indifference, and learned to criticise almost before I had learned to pity. And so I do not think I enjoyed Christmas very much the less, although my father was away from home and all our little festivities were dispirited. I had plenty of good things to eat, and presents, and a picture-book from Martha. I had a new rocking-horse—how changeless and impassive its mottled battered face looks out at me across the years ! It was brisk, clear weather, and on St. Stephen's Day I went to see if there was any ice yet on the Miller's Pool.

"I was stooping down at the extreme edge of the pool, snapping the brittle splinters of the ice with

my finger, when I heard a voice calling me in the still air. It was Jane Grey, walking on the heath with my father, who had called me, having seen me from a distance stooping beside the water.

"So you see I have kept my promise," she said, taking my hand.

"But you promised to come by yourself," I said.

"Well, so I will then," she answered, nodding her head. "Good-bye," she added, turning to my father. "It's three's none, you see. Nicholas shall take me home to tea, and you can call for him in the evening, if you will; that is, if you are coming."

"Are you asking me to come?" he said moodily, "do you care whether I come or not?"

"She lifted her face and spoke gravely. "You are my friend," she said, "of course I care whether you are with me or not." He scrutinised her through half-closed lids. His face was haggard, gloomy with *ennui*. "How you harp on the word, you punctilious Jane. Do you suppose I am still in my teens? Twenty years ago, now—— It amuses me to hear you women talk. It's little you ever really feel."

"I don't think I am quite without feeling," she replied, "you are a little difficult, you know."

"Difficult," he echoed in derision. He checked himself and shrugged his shoulders. "You see, Jane, it's all on the surface; I boast of my indifference. It's the one rag of philosophy age denies no one. It is so easy to be heroic—debonair, iron-grey, fluent, dramatic—you know it's captivation, perhaps? But after all, life's comedy, when one stops smiling, is

only the tepidest farce. Or the gilt wears off and the pinchbeck tragedy shows through. And so, as I say, we talk on, being past feeling. One by one our hopes come home to roost, our delusions find themselves out, and the mystery proves to be nothing but sleight-of-hand. It's age, my dear Jane—age ; it turns one to stone. With you young people life's a dream ; ask Nicholas here !' He shrugged his shoulders, adding under his breath, 'But one wakes on a devilish hard pallet.'

" 'Of course,' said Jane slowly, 'you are only talking cleverly, and then it does not matter whether it's true or not, I suppose. I can't say. I don't think you mean it, and so it comes to nothing. I can't and won't believe you feel so little—I can't.' She continued to smile, yet, I fancied, with the brightness of tears in her eyes. 'It's all mockery and make-believe ; we are not the miserable slaves of time you try to fancy. There must be some way to win through.' She turned away, then added slowly, 'You ask me to be fearless, sincere, to speak my heart ; I wonder, do you ?'

" My father did not look at her, appeared not to have seen the hand she had half held out to him, and as swiftly withdrawn. 'The truth is, Jane,' he said slowly, 'I am past sincerity now. And as for *heart* it is a quite discredited organ at forty. Life, thought, selfishness, egotism, call it what you will ; they have all done their worst with me ; and I really haven't the sentiment to pretend that they haven't. And when bright youth and sentiment are gone ; why, go too, dear lady ! Existence proves

nothing but brazen inanity afterwards. But there's always that turning left to the dullest and dustiest road—oblivion.' He remained silent a moment. Silence deep and strange lay all around us. The air was still, the wintry sky unutterably calm. And again that low dispassionate voice continued: 'It's only when right seems too easy a thing, too trivial, and not worth the doing ; and wrong a foolish thing —too dull . . . There, take care of her, Nicholas ; take care of her, "snips and snails," you know. *Au revoir*, 'pon my word, I almost wish it was good-bye.'

"Jane Grey regarded him attentively. 'So then do I,' she replied in a low voice, 'for I shall never understand you ; perhaps I should hate to understand you.'

"My father turned with an affected laugh, and left us.

"Miss Grey and I walked slowly along beside the frosty bulrushes until we came to the wood. The bracken and heather were faded. The earth was dark and rich with autumnal rains. Fir-cones lay on the moss beneath the dark green branches. It was all now utterly silent in the wintry afternoon. Far away rose tardily, and alighted, the hoarse rooks upon the ploughed earth ; high in the pale sky passed a few on ragged wing.

"What does my father mean by wishing it was good-bye ? I said.

"But my companion did not answer me in words. She clasped my hand ; she seemed very slim and gracious walking by my side on the hardened ground. My mother was small now and awkward beside her

in my imagination. I questioned her about the ice, about the red sky, and if there was any mistletoe in the woods. Sometimes she, in turn, asked me questions too, and when I answered them we would look at each other and smile, and it seemed it was with her as it was with me—of the pure gladness I found in her company. In the middle of our walk to the Thorns she bent down in the cold twilight, and putting her hands on my shoulders, ‘My dear, dear Nicholas,’ she said, ‘you must be a good son to your mother—brave and kind ; will you ?’

“‘He hardly ever speaks to mother now,’ I answered instinctively.

“She pressed her lips to my cheek, and her cheek was cold against mine, and she clasped her arms about me. ‘Kiss me,’ she said. ‘We must do our best, mustn’t we ?’ she pleaded, still holding me. I looked mournfully into the gathering darkness, ‘That’s easy when you’re grown up,’ I said. She laughed and kissed me again, and then we took hands and ran till we were out of breath, towards the distant lights of the Thorns. . . .

“I had been some time in bed, lying awake in the warmth, when my mother came softly through the darkness into my room. She sat down at the bedside, breathing hurriedly. ‘Where have you been all the evening ?’ she said.

“‘Miss Grey asked me to stay to tea,’ I answered.

“‘Did I give you permission to go to tea with Miss Grey ?’

“I made no answer.

“‘If you go to that house again, I shall beat you.

You hear me, Nicholas? Alone, or with your father, if you go there again, without my permission, I shall beat you. You have not been whipped for a long time, have you?' I could not see her face, but her head was bent towards me in the dark, as she sat—almost crouched—on my bedside.

"I made no answer. But when my mother had gone, without kissing me, I cried noiselessly on into my pillow. Something had suddenly flown out of memory, never to sing again. Life had become a little colder and stranger. I had always been my own chief company; now another sentimental barrier had arisen between the world and me, past its heedlessness, past my understanding to break down.

"Hardly a week passed now without some bitter quarrel. I seemed ever to be stealing out of sound of angry voices; ever fearful of being made the butt of my father's serene taunts, of my mother's passions and desperate remorse. He disdained to defend himself against her, never reasoned with her; he merely shrugged his shoulders, denied her charges, ignored her anger; coldly endeavouring only to show his indifference, to conceal by every means in his power his own inward weariness and vexation. I saw this, of course, only vaguely, yet with all a child's certainty of insight, though I rarely knew the cause of my misery; and I continued to love them both in my selfish fashion, not a whit the less.

"At last, on St. Valentine's Day, things came to a worse pass than before. It had always been my father's custom to hang my mother a valentine on

the handle of her little parlour door, a string of pearls, a fan, a book of poetry, whatever it might be. She came down early this morning, and sat in the window-seat, looking out at the falling snow. She said nothing at breakfast, only feigned to eat, lifting her eyes at intervals to glance at my father with a strange intensity, as if of hatred, tapping her foot on the floor. He took no notice of her, sat quiet and moody with his own thoughts. I think he had not really forgotten the day, for I found long afterwards in his old bureau a bracelet purchased but a week before with her name written on a scrap of paper, inside the case. Yet it seemed to be the absence of this little gift that had driven my mother beyond reason.

"Towards evening, tired of the house, tired of being alone, I went out and played awhile listlessly in the snow. At nightfall I went in ; and in the dark heard angry voices. My father came out of the dining-room and looked at me in silence, standing in the gloom of the wintry dusk. My mother followed him. I can see her now, leaning in the doorway, white with rage, her eyes ringed and darkened with continuous trouble, her hand trembling.

"'It shall learn to hate you,' she cried in a low, dull voice. 'I will teach it every moment to hate and despise you as I— Oh, *I* hate and despise you.'

"My father looked at her calmly and profoundly before replying. He took up a cloth hat and brushed it with his hand. 'Very well then, you have chosen,' he said coldly. 'It has always lain with you. You

have exaggerated, you have raved, and now you have said what can never be recalled or forgotten. Here's Nicholas. Pray do not imagine, however, that I am defending myself. I have nothing to defend. I think of no one but myself—no one. Endeavour to understand me, no one. Perhaps, indeed, you yourself—no more than—. But words again—the dull old round! He made a peculiar gesture with his hand. 'Well, life is . . . ach! I have done. So be it.' He stood looking out of the door. 'You see, it's snowing,' he said, as if to himself.

"All the long night before and all day long, snow had been falling continuously. The air was wintry and cold. I could discern nothing beyond the porch but a gloomy accumulation of cloud in the twilight air, now darkened with the labyrinthine motion of the snow. My father glanced back for an instant into the house, and, as I fancy, regarded me with a kind of strange, close earnestness. But he went out and his footsteps were instantly silenced.

"My mother peered at me in terrible perplexity, her eyes wide with terror and remorse. 'What? What?' she said. I stared at her stupidly. Three snowflakes swiftly and airily floated together into the dim hall from the gloom without. She clasped her hand over her mouth. Overburdened her fingers seemed to be, so slender were they, with her many rings.

"'Nicholas, Nicholas, tell me ; what was I saying? What was I saying?' She stumbled hastily to the door. 'Arthur, Arthur,' she cried from the porch, 'it's St. Valentine's Day, that was all I meant ; come

back, come back !' But perhaps my father was already out of hearing ; I do not think he made any reply.

"My mother came in doubtfully, resting her hand on the wall. And she walked very slowly and laboriously upstairs. While I was standing at the foot of the staircase, looking out across the hall into the evening, Martha climbed primly up from the kitchen with her lighted taper, shut-to the door and lit the hall lamp. Already the good smell of the feast cooking floated up from the kitchen, and gladdened my spirits. 'Will he come back ?' Martha said, looking very scared in the light of her taper. 'It's such a fall of snow, already it's a hand's breadth on the window-sill. Oh, Master Nicholas, it's a hard world for us women.' She followed my mother upstairs, carrying light to all the gloomy upper rooms.

"I sat down in the window-seat of the dining-room, and read in my picture-book as well as I could by the flame-light. By-and-by, Martha returned to lay the table.

"As far back as brief memory carried me, it had been our custom to make a Valentine's feast on the Saint's day. This was my father's mother's birthday also. When she was alive I well remember her visiting us with her companion, Miss Schreiner, who talked in such good-humoured English to me. This same anniversary had last year brought about a tender reconciliation between my father and mother, after a quarrel that meant how little then. And I remember on this day to have seen the first

fast-sealed buds upon the almond tree. We would have a great spangled cake in the middle of the table, with marzipan and comfits, just as at Christmastide. And when Mrs. Merry lived in the village her little fair daughters used to come in a big carriage to spend the evening with us and to share my Valentine's feast.

"But all this was changed now. My wits were sharper, but I was none the less only the duller for that ; my hopes and dreams had a little fallen and faded. I looked idly at my picture-book, vaguely conscious that its colours pleased me less than once upon a time ; that I was rather tired of seeing them, and they just as tired of seeing me. And yet I had nothing else to do, so I must go on with a hard face, turning listlessly the pictured pages.

"About seven o'clock my mother sent for me. I found her sitting in her bedroom. Candles were burning before the looking-glass. She was already dressed in her handsome black silk gown, and wearing her pearl necklace. She began to brush my hair, curling its longer ends with her fingers, which she moistened in the pink bowl that was one of the first things I had set eyes on in this world. She put me on a clean blouse and my buckle shoes, talking to me the while, almost as if she were telling me a story. Then she looked at herself long and earnestly in the glass ; throwing up her chin with a smile, as was a habit of hers in talk. I wandered about the room, fingering the little toilet-boxes and nick-nacks on the table. By mischance I upset one of these, a scent-bottle that held rose-water. The water ran out and

filled the warm air with its fragrance. ‘You foolish, clumsy boy !’ said my mother, and slapped my hand. More out of vexation and tiredness than because of the pain, I began to cry. And then, with infinite tenderness, she leaned her head on my shoulder. ‘Mother can’t think very well just now,’ she said ; and cried so bitterly in silence that I was only too ready to extricate myself and run away when her hold on me relaxed.

“I climbed slowly upstairs to Martha’s bedroom, and kneeling on a cane chair looked out of the window. The flakes had ceased to fall now, although the snowy heath was encompassed in mist ; above the snow the clouds had parted, drifting from beneath the stars, and these in their constellations were trembling very brightly, and here and there burned one of them in solitude larger and wilder in its shining than the rest. But though I did not tire of looking out of the window, my knees began to ache ; and the little room was very cold and still so near the roof. So I went down to the dining-room, with all its seven candlesticks kindled, seeming to my unaccustomed eyes a very splendid blaze out of the dark. My mother was kneeling on the rug by the fireside. She looked very small, even dwarfish, I thought. She was gazing into the flames ; one shoe curved beneath the hem of her gown, her chin resting on her hand.

“I surveyed the table with its jellies and sweet-meats and glasses and fruit, and began to be very hungry, so savoury was the smell of the turkey roasting downstairs. Martha knocked at the door when the clock had struck eight.

" 'Dinner is ready, Ma'am.'

" My mother glanced fleetingly at the clock. ' Just a little, only a very little while longer, tell Mrs. Ryder ; your master will be home in a minute.' She rose and placed the claret in the hearth at some distance from the fire.

" 'Is it nicer warm, mother?' I said. She looked at me with startled eyes and nodded. 'Did you hear anything, Nicholas? Run to the door and listen; was that a sound of footsteps?'

" I opened the outer door and peered into the darkness ; but it seemed the world ended here with the warmth and the light : beyond could extend only winter and silence, a region that, familiar though it was to me, seemed now to terrify me like an enormous sea.

" 'It's stopped snowing,' I said, 'but there isn't anybody there ; nobody at all, mother.'

" The hours passed heavily from quarter on to quarter. The turkey, I grieved to hear, was to be taken out of the oven, and put away to cool in the pantry. I was bidden help myself to what I pleased of the trembling jellies, and delicious pink blanc-mange. Already midnight would be the next hour to be chimed. I felt sick, yet was still hungry and very tired. The candles began to burn low. 'Leave me a little light here, then,' my mother said at last to Martha, 'and go to bed. Perhaps your master has missed his way home in the snow.' But Mrs. Ryder had followed Martha into the room.

" 'You must pardon my interference, Ma'am, but it isn't right, it isn't really right of you to sit up

longer. Master will not come back, maybe, before morning. And I shouldn't be doing my bounden duty, Ma'am, except I spoke my mind. Just now too, of all times.'

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Ryder," my mother answered simply, "but I would prefer not to go to bed yet. It's very lonely on the heath at night. But I shall not want anything else, thank you."

"Well, Ma'am, I've had my say, and done my conscience's bidding. And I have brought you up this tumbler of mulled wine; else you'll be sinking away or something with the fatigue."

"My mother took the wine, sipped of it with a wan smile at Mrs. Ryder over the brim; and Mrs. Ryder retired with Martha. I don't think they had noticed me sitting close in the shadow on my stool beside the table. But all through that long night, I fancy, these good souls took it in turn to creep down stealthily and look in on us; and in the small hours of the morning, when the fire had fallen low, they must have wrapped us both warm in shawls. They left me then, I think, to be my mother's company. Indeed, I remember we spoke in the darkness, and she took my hand.

"My mother and I shared the steaming wine together when they were gone; our shadows looming faintly huge upon the ceiling. We said very little, but I looked softly into her grey childish eyes, and we kissed one another kneeling there together before the fire. And afterwards, I jigged softly round the table, pilfering whatever sweet or savoury mouthful took my fancy. But by-and-by in the silent house—

a silence broken only by the fluttering of the flames, and the odd far-away stir of the frost, drowsiness vanquished me; I sat down by the fireside, leaning my head on a chair. And sitting thus, vaguely eyeing firelight and wavering shadow, I began to nod, and very soon dream stalked in, mingling with reality.

"It was early morning when I awoke, dazed and cold and miserable in my uncomfortable resting-place. The rare odour of frost was on the air. The ashes of the fire lay iron-grey upon the cold hearth. An intensely clear white ray of light leaned up through a cranny of the shutters to the cornice of the ceiling. I got up with difficulty. My mother was still asleep, breathing heavily, and as I stooped, regarding her curiously, I could almost watch her transient dreams fleeting over her face ; and now she smiled faintly ; and now she raised her eyebrows as if in some playful and happy talk with my father ; then again utterly still darkness would descend on brow and lid and lip.

"I touched her sleeve, suddenly conscious of my loneliness in the large house. Her face clouded instantly ; she sighed profoundly : 'What ?' she said, 'nothing—nothing?' She stretched out her hand towards me ; the lids drew back from eyes still blind from sleep. But gradually time regained its influence over her. She moistened her lips and turned to me, and suddenly, in a gush of agony, remembrance of the night returned to her. She hid her face in her hands, rocking her body gently to and fro ; then rose and smoothed back her hair at the looking-glass. I was surprised to see no trace of tears on her

cheeks. Her lips moved, as if unconsciously a heart worn out with grief addressed that pale reflection of her sorrow in the glass. I took hold of the hand that hung down listlessly on her silk skirt, and fondled it, kissing punctilioiusly each loose ring in turn.

“But I do not think she heeded my kisses. So I returned to the table on which was still set out the mockery of our Valentine feast, strangely disenchanted in the chill dusk of daybreak. I put a handful of wine biscuits and a broken piece of cake in my pocket; for a determination had taken me to go out on to the heath. My heart beat thick and fast in imagination of the solitary snow and of myself wandering in loneliness across its untrampled surface. A project also was forming in my mind of walking over to the Thorns; for somehow I knew my mother would not scold or punish me that day. Perhaps, I thought, my father would be there. And I would tell Miss Grey all about my adventure of the night spent down in the dining-room. So moving very stealthily, and betraying no eagerness, lest I should be forbidden to go, I stole at length unperceived from the room, and leaving the great hall door ajar, ran out joyously into the wintry morning.

“Already dawn was clear and high in the sky, already the first breezes were moving in the mists; and breathed chill, as if it were the lingering darkness itself on my cheeks. The air was cold, yet with a fresh faint sweetness. The snow lay crisp across its perfect surface, mounded softly over the gorse-bushes, though here and there a spray of parched blossom yet protruded from its cowl. Flaky particles

of ice floated invisible in the air. I called out with pleasure to see the little ponds where the snow had been blown away from the black ice. I saw on the bushes too the webs of spiders stretched from thorn to thorn, and festooned with crystals of hoar-frost. I turned and counted as far as I could my footsteps leading back to the house, which lay roofed in gloomy pallor, dim and obscured in the darkened west.

"A waning moon that had risen late in the night shone, it seemed, very near to the earth. But every moment light swept invincibly in, pouring its crystal like a river ; and darkness sullenly withdrew into the north. And when at last the sun appeared, glittering along the rosy snow, I turned in an ecstasy and with my finger pointed him out, as if the house I had left behind me might view him with my own delight. Indeed, I saw its windows transmuted, and heard afar a thrush pealing in the bare branches of a pear-tree ; and a robin startled me, so suddenly shrill and sweet he broke into song from a snowy tuft of gorse.

"I was now come to the beginning of a gradual incline, from the summit of which I should presently descry in the distance the avenue of lindens that led towards the village from the margin of the heath. As I went on my way, munching my biscuits, looking gaily about me, I brooded deliciously on the breakfast which Miss Grey would doubtless sit me down to ; and almost forgot the occasion of my errand, and the troubled house I had left behind me. At length I climbed to the top of the smooth ridge and

looked down. At a little distance from me grew a crimson hawthorn-tree that often in past Aprils I had used for a green tent from the showers ; but now it was closely hooded, darkening with its faint shadow the long expanse of unshadowed whiteness. Not very far from this bush I perceived a figure lying stretched along the snow and knew instinctively that this was my father lying here.

"The sight did not then surprise or dismay me. It seemed but the lucid sequel to that long heavy night-watch, to all the troubles and perplexities of the past. I felt no sorrow, but stood beside the body, regarding it only with deep wonder and a kind of earnest curiosity, yet perhaps with a remote pity too, that he could not see me in the beautiful morning. His grey hand lay arched in the snow, his darkened face, on which showed a smear of dried blood, was turned away a little as if out of the oblique sunshine. I understood that he was dead, was already loosely speculating on what changes it would make ; how I should spend my time ; what would happen in the house now that he was gone, his influence, his authority, his discord. I remembered too that I was alone, was master of this immense secret, that I must go home sedately, as if it were a Sunday, and in a low voice tell my mother, concealing any exultation I might feel in the office. I imagined the questions that would be asked me, and was considering the proper answers to make to them, when my morbid dreams were suddenly broken in on by Martha Rodd. She stood in my footsteps, looking down on me from the ridge from which I

had but just now descended. She hastened towards me, stooping a little as if she carried a burden, her mouth ajar, her forehead wrinkled beneath its wispy light brown hair.

“‘Look, Martha, look,’ I cried, ‘I found him in the snow ; he’s dead.’ And suddenly a bond seemed to snap in my heart. The beauty and solitude of the morning, the perfect whiteness of the snow—it was all an uncouth mockery against me—a subtle and quiet treachery. The tears gushed into my eyes and in my fear and affliction I clung to the poor girl, sobbing bitterly, protesting my grief, hiding my eyes in terror from that still, inscrutable shape. She smoothed my hair with her hand again and again, her eyes fixed ; and then at last, venturing cautiously nearer, she stooped over my father. ‘O Master Nicholas,’ she said, ‘his poor dark hair ! What will we do now ? What will your poor mamma do now, and him gone ?’ She hid her face in her hands, and our tears gushed out anew.

“But my grief was speedily forgotten. The novelty of being left entirely alone, my own master ; to go where I would ; to do as I pleased ; the experience of being pitied most when I least needed it, and then—when misery and solitariness came over me like a cloud—of being utterly ignored, turned my thoughts gradually away. My father’s body was brought home and laid in my mother’s little parlour that looked out on to the garden and the snowy orchard. The house was darkened. I took a secret pleasure in peeping in on the sunless rooms, and stealing from door to door through corridors

screened from the daylight. My mother was ill ; and for some inexplicable reason I connected her illness with the bevy of gentlemen dressed in black who came one morning to the house and walked away together over the heath. Finally Mrs. Marshall drove up one afternoon from Islington, and by the bundles she had brought with her and her grained box with the iron handles I knew that she was come, as once before in my experience, to stay.

"I was playing on the morrow in the hall with my leaden soldiers when there came into my mind vaguely the voices of Mrs. Ryder and of Mrs. Marshall gossiping together on their tedious way upstairs from the kitchen.

"'No, Mrs. Marshall, nothing,' I heard Mrs. Ryder saying, 'not one word, not one word. And now the poor dear lady left quite alone, and only the doctor to gainsay that fatherless mite from facing the idle inquisitive questions of all them strangers. It's neither for me nor you, Mrs. Marshall, to speak out just what comes into our heads here and now. The ways of the Almighty are past understanding—but a kinder at *heart* never trod this earth.'

"'Ah,' said Mrs. Marshall.

"'I knew to my sorrow,' continued Mrs. Ryder, 'there was words in the house ; but there, wheresoever you be there's that. Human beings ain't angels, married or single, and in every—'

"'Wasn't there talk of some——?' insinuated Mrs. Marshall discreetly.

"'Talk, Mrs. Marshall,' said Mrs. Ryder, coming to a standstill, 'I scorn the word ! A pinch of

truth in a hogshead of falsehood. I don't gainsay it even. I just shut my ears—there—with the dead.' Mrs. Marshall had opened her mouth to reply when I was discovered, crouched as small as possible at the foot of the stairs.

"'Well, here's pitchers!' said Mrs. Marshall pleasantly. 'And this is the poor fatherless manikin, I suppose. It's hard on the innocent, Mrs. Ryder, and him grown such a sturdy child too, as I said from the first. Well, now, and don't you remember me, little man, don't you remember Mrs. Marshall? He ought to, now!'

"'He's a very good boy in general,' said Mrs. Ryder, 'and I'm sure I hope and pray he'll grow up to be a comfort to his poor widowed mother, if so be——' They glanced earnestly at one another, and Mrs. Marshall stooped with a sigh of effort and drew a big leather purse from a big loose pocket under her skirt, and selected a bright ha'penny from among its silver and copper.

"'I make no doubt he will, poor mite,' she said cheerfully; I took the ha'penny in silence and the two women passed slowly upstairs.

"In the afternoon, in order to be beyond call of Martha, I went out on to the heath with a shovel, intent on building a great tomb in the snow. Yet more snow had fallen during the night; it now lay so deep as to cover my socks above my shoes. I laboured very busily, shovelling, beating, moulding, stamping. So intent was I that I did not see Miss Grey until she was close beside me. I looked up from the snow and was surprised to find the sun already

set and the low mists of evening approaching. Miss Grey was veiled and dressed in furs to the throat. She drew her ungloved hand from her muff.

"Nicholas," she said in a low voice.

"I stood for some reason confused and ashamed without answering her. She sat down on my shapeless mound of snow, and took me by the hand. Then she drew up her veil, and I saw her face pale and darkened, and her dark eyes gravely looking into mine.

"'My poor, poor Nicholas,' she said, and continued to gaze at me with her warm hand clasping mine. 'What can I say? What can I do? Isn't it very, very lonely out here in the snow?'

"'I didn't feel lonely much,' I answered, 'I was making a—I was playing at building.'

"'And I am sitting on your beautiful snow-house, then?' she said, smiling sadly, her hand trembling upon mine.

"'It isn't a house,' I answered, turning away.

"She pressed my hand on the furs at her throat.

"'Poor cold, blue hands,' she said. 'Do you like playing alone?'

"'I like you being here,' I answered. 'I wish you would come always, or at least sometimes.'

"She drew me close to her, smiling, and bent and kissed my head.

"'There,' she said, 'I am here now.'

"'Mother's ill,' I said.

"She drew back and looked out over the heath towards the house.

"'They have put my father in the little parlour, in his coffin; of course, you know he's dead, and Mrs.

Marshall's come; she gave me a ha'penny this morning. Dr. Graham gave me a whole crown, though.' I took it out of my breeches pocket and showed it her.

"That's very, very nice,' she said. What lots of nice things you can buy with it! And, look, I am going to give you a little keepsake too, between just you and me.'

"It was a small silver box that she drew out of her muff, and embossed in the silver of the lid was a crucifix. 'I thought, perhaps, I should see you to-day, you know,' she continued softly. 'Now, who's given you this?' she said, putting the box into my hand.

"'You,' I answered softly.

"'And who am I?'

"'Miss Grey,' I said.

"'Your friend, Jane Grey,' she repeated, as if she were fond of her own name. 'Say it now—always my friend, Jane Grey.'

"I repeated it after her.

"'And now,' she continued, 'tell me which room is—is the little parlour. Is it that small window at the corner under the ivy?'

"I shook my head.

"'Which?' she said in a whisper, after a long pause.

"I twisted my shovel in the snow. 'Would you like to see my father?' I said. 'I am sure, you know, Martha would not mind; and mother's in bed.' She started, and looked with quiet, dark eyes into my face. 'Where?' she said, without stirring.

"'It's at the back, a little window that comes out

—if you were to come this evening, I would be playing in the hall ; I always play in the hall, after tea, if I can ; and now, always. Nobody would see you at all, you know.'

"She sighed. 'O what are you saying?' she said, and stood up, drawing down her veil.

"But would you like to?" I repeated. She stooped suddenly, pressing her veiled face to mine. 'I'll come, I'll come,' she said, her face utterly changed so close to my eyes. We can both still—still be loyal to him, can't we, Nicholas ?'

"She walked away quickly, towards the pool and the little darkened wood. I looked after her and knew that she would be waiting there alone till evening. I looked at my silver box with great satisfaction, and after opening it, put it into my pocket with my crown piece and my ha'penny, and continued my building for awhile.

"But now zest for it was gone ; and I began to feel cold, the frost closing in keenly as darkness gathered. So I went home.

"My silence and suspicious avoidance of scrutiny and question passed unnoticed. Indeed, I ate my tea in solitude, except that now and again one or other of the women would come bustling in on some brief errand. A peculiar suppressed stir was in the house. I wondered what could be the cause of it ; and felt a little timid and anxious of my project being discovered.

"None the less I was playing in the evening, as I had promised, close to the door, alert to catch the faintest sign of the coming of my visitor.

"Run down in the kitchen, dearie," said Martha. Her cheeks were flushed. She was carrying a big can of steaming water. "You must keep very, *very* quiet this evening and go to bed like a good boy, and perhaps to-morrow morning I'll tell you a great, great secret." She kissed me with hasty rapture. I was not especially inquisitive of her secret just then, and eagerly promised to be quite quiet if I might continue to play where I was.

"Well, very, *very* quiet then, and you mustn't let Mrs. Marshall," she began, but hurried hastily away in answer to a peremptory summons from upstairs.

"Almost as soon as she was gone I heard a light rap on the door. It seemed that Jane Grey brought in with her the cold and freshness of the woods. I led the way on tiptoe down the narrow corridor and into the small, silent room. The candles burned pure and steadfastly in their brightness. The air was still and languid with the perfume of flowers. Overhead passed light, heedful footsteps; but they seemed not a disturbing sound, only a rumour beyond the bounds of silence.

"I am very sorry," I said, "but they have nailed it down. Martha says the men came this afternoon."

"Miss Grey took a little bunch of snowdrops from her bosom, and hid them in among the clustered wreaths of flowers; and she knelt down on the floor, with a little silver cross which she sometimes wore pressed tight to her lips. I felt ill at ease to see her, praying, and wished I could go back to my soldiers. But while I watched her, seeing in marvellous

brilliancy everything in the little room, and remembering dimly the snow lying beneath the stars in the darkness of the garden, I listened also to the quiet footsteps passing to and fro in the room above. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a small, continuous, angry crying.

"Miss Grey looked up. Her eyes were very clear and wonderful in the candlelight.

"What was that?" she said faintly, listening.

"I stared at her. The cry welled up anew, pitifully, as if of a small remote helpless indignation.

"Why it sounds just like—a little baby," I said.

"She crossed herself hastily and arose. 'Nicholas!' she said in a strange, quiet, bewildered voice—yet her face was most curiously bright. She looked at me lovingly and yet so strangely I wished I had not let her come in.

"She went out as she had entered. I did not so much as peep into the darkness after her, but busy with a hundred thoughts returned to my play.

"Long past my usual bed-time, as I sat sipping a mug of hot milk before the glowing cinders of the kitchen fire, Martha told me her secret. . . .

"So my impossible companion in the High Street yesterday was own and only brother to your crazy old friend, Richard," said the Count. "His only brother," he added, in a muse.

THE COUNT'S COURSHIP

It had long been our custom to muse and gossip through the summer evening twilight, and now we had lingered so late that the darkness of night had come into the room. But two, at least, of the three of us were well content so to moon on, the fitful summer lightnings shining pale on our faces as we sat at the window. As for myself, I can only confess that with every tick of the clock I had been more and more inclined to withdraw, and so give the others the opportunity and ease of my absence. But likely enough, had I done so, the Count would have bluffly recalled me, or my aunt would have roused herself from her reverie to candles and common sense.

So I held my tongue, after my aunt's example, who sat, still and erect, looking out through her glasses, her hands upon the arms of her chair, while the Count spoke seldom, and that generally in a kind of inarticulate discourse with himself.

There was plenty to busy my thoughts. The Count was evidently on the point of abandoning his long-cherished platonicism. My aunt, of late, had been far from her usual self, now brisk, now apathetic; but neither and nothing for long together. Matrimony was in the air, and I must soon be an exile. Soon, doubtless, a wife (and how capable and prudent a wife) would relieve me of my duties to my eloquent, arbitrary old friend. I had become superfluous. The most amiable of chaperons now found himself gradually converted into a tartish gooseberry. The quick lightning had but just now illuminated the

Count's face as he bent towards her. In his eyes was inspiration. And my aunt's almost uncivil withdrawal of her hand was evidently all but the last capricious valedictory gesture to middle age and widowhood.

My aunt apparently suddenly realized this, and the hazard of keeping silent. She rose abruptly, smoothing out her silk skirts as if she had thought to herself, "Well, that's done with."

"I fear I was nodding, Count; I beg pardon," she said in a rather faint voice, and behind the semblance of a yawn. "The air's close and heavy. It seems a storm's gathering."

We neither of us answered her.

"Richard," she said, "oblige me by ringing the bell."

The Count deftly intercepted me.

"It's a waste of peace and quietness," said he appealingly. "Won't you sit but a few minutes longer? Who knows: not so many days may be left, with such quiet ends—the twilight, summer? Richard shall fetch you a shawl. We'll take a turn in the garden."

"Very pretty sentiments, Count," answered my aunt, "but you must take pity on old bones. Upstairs must be my garden to-night. I'm tired and drowsy—it's been a hot, dusty day—and I think I'll be getting to my rest while the thunder is out of hearing."

Soon candles gleamed on the wall; the pensive romantic twilight of evening was over. My aunt turned her face slowly, even reluctantly, I fancied,

into their radiance. She looked pale, tired ; and seemed disturbed and perplexed.

"I think, Richard, I'd like your arm up the stairs." Again the Count forestalled me. "Bless me, Count," said my aunt in shaken, almost querulous tones, "you'll be completely spoiling me with your—your kindness. I wouldn't rob you of your peace and quiet for all the world. There, Richard, that's it."

She leaned a little heavily on my arm, walking slowly and deliberately. In the doorway she turned ; hesitated.

"And now, good-night, my dear Count," she said.

The Count stood, stark as a patriot, against the wall. It was not to be "roses all the way."

"Good-night, my dear lady," said he.

As we slowly ascended the stairs I could hardly refrain from gently taxing my aunt with what seemed very like coquetry. Yet something in her words had set me doubting. And as I now looked sideways at her, I fancied I could detect a gravity in her face which no mere feminine caprice could cause or explain. At her bedroom door I handed her the candle.

"I wish you could have stayed a little," I mumbled inanely ; "he really meant it, you know. I ought to have realized that"

She took the candle, staring vacantly into my face the while.

"I should like to see you, Richard, in about ten minutes' time," she said. "Step up cautiously to my room here. I shall be awaiting you. I want a few minutes' quiet, sensible talk—you understand ?"

And with that she went in and shut the door.

"Richard, Richard," I heard the Count's stealthy whisper at the foot of the stairs ; but I made a clatter with the door handle, pretending not to have heard him.

I sat in my bedroom speculating in vain what my aunt wanted with me.

In ten minutes I tapped softly, and she herself opened the door. She was attired in a voluminous dressing-gown of scarlet flannel ; her hair was loosely plaited and looped up on her shoulders, with less of grey in it than I had supposed. She shut the door after me, and rather stiffly signed to me to sit down.

"I'll trouble you, please, to speak rather softly, Richard," she said, "because my window is open for air, and the Count is walking in the garden." She seated herself on a stiff bedroom chair, clasping her hands in her ample lap. I've called you in, my boy, to tell you that I am going to leave here to-morrow."

I leaned forward to speak, but she peremptorily waved me back. "Janet has ordered a cab for me ; it will be at the door at eleven o'clock in the morning. My trunks—these two, just what I shall require—are packed and ready. Janet will see to the rest. And I'll ask you to be kind enough to send the others to me by the railway before the end of the week. See that they're securely locked and corded, the keys are under the clock there. What's more—I want you to take the Count for a walk early to-morrow morning, and ~~return~~ with him till luncheon, when I shall be ~~well~~ and I shall be, well—

out of the house. Don't keep on opening your mouth, Richard ; it distracts me. Then in some sort of explanation you are to tell him that his hospitality was so—so congenial to me that I hadn't the heart nor the words either—to say good-bye. Tell him I'll *write* good-bye. . . . Is that perfectly clear, now?"

A languid breath of air gently lifted the white blind, as if to cool the flush that had spread over my aunt's cheek. Her face was inscrutable.

"What address did you say for the boxes?"

"Bless the boy ! send them home."

"Very well, Aunt Lucy," I answered, and rose from my chair. My aunt lifted her hand, and let it fall again into her lap.

"Is there anything else?" I said.

The inscrutability of her expression angered and baffled me. She continued to look at me with an open solemnity, but as if I were a hundred miles away.

"Why do you pick and choose your words, make such a pretence, Richard, when you might speak out?"

"'Pretence,' Aunt Lucy?"

"If an old woman came in such straits to me, and I was a tolerably sensible young man like yourself, I hope and trust I'd use my wits to better purpose. I am in some anxiety. You see it. *You* are not blind. But you are saying to yourself, in your conceit and pique—'I won't ask her what it is.' You think—'I'll wait for the old lady's confession ; it's bound to come.' I ask you candidly, is that open and manly ?

Is that the English frankness and chivalry we never weary of boasting about? Do you suppose that mere cleverness watched over your cradle? Do you think mere cleverness will ever win you a wife? "Would—would the Count?"

Colour once more had welled into her cheeks, and her carpet-slipped foot was thrust impatiently out from beneath her dressing-gown.

"I did not suppose you wished me to intrude," I stammered. "You have your own reasons, I assume, for ordering me about. I assume, you had your own reasons, too, for not taking me into your confidence. I am sorry, Aunt Lucy, but I don't see what else I could have done."

"Sit down, Richard," she said.

"Look here, Aunt Lucy," I interposed a little hotly, "you ask me to speak out. You've said a good many things a fellow would resent pretty warmly from—any one else. Now let me have my say too. And I can't help it if I do offend you; or if you think I'm butting in on what doesn't concern me. I say this—it's a mean, shabby thing to treat the Count like this. You've talked and walked with him. You know what he thinks—what he feels. He's not the unfeeling simpleton you think *me*. But he can't help hoping. Now is it fair and square then to go off like this behind his back—because you daren't meet him and brave him to his face? He simply can't help himself. That's the point. I'm not blind. You can't explain and you daren't wait to be asked for an explanation. It's simply selfishness, that's what it is. And, what is worse, you *don't want to go*." I blundered on and

on to the grim lady, venturing much further than I had ever dreamed of doing ; and then fell suddenly silent.

"In some respects, that is the truth, Richard," she said at last, quite gently—"I own that freely. But it's not fear or pusillanimity, and no injury, my boy. I am in the right ; and yet it's true I daren't go to him and tell him so. If I lifted a finger—if, just as I am, I walked downstairs and went out and took a turn with him in the garden, on the man's arm—well, I *ask* you, What would he do ?"

"He'd pop the question," I said vulgarly and resentfully, "and you know it. And a jolly good thing too, for both of you. What's more, you've never given him an atom of reason to suppose you wouldn't accept him."

"I say *that's* untrue, Richard. And who asked for your views on that, pray ? Be smart, sir, in better season. The Count, you say, would ask me to be his wife—what then ? I am not too old ; I am not too feeble ; I am a practical housekeeper ! and—I like the man. He'd ask me to be his wife—and then—as I walked in the garden with him, I should be stumbling and peering, pushing and poking my way. Dark to me ! Whatever the happiness within. Richard, you poor blind creature, don't you see it ? Can the Count marry a woman who's all but *eyeless*, who can but glimmer to-day out of what will be sightless and hopeless as that night outside, to-morrow ? I have been struggling against the truth. I like being here. I like—~~Oh, I have stayed too long. You stupid, short-sighted men !~~ He has seen me day after day. He has

seen me go fingering on from chair to chair. Was I hiding it? Do I or do I not wear spectacles? Do they distort my eyes till I look like an owl in a belfry? Should I wear this hideous monstrosity if—you should have seen, you should have guessed."

I put my hand on my aunt's as it lay on her knee.

"Good Lord," I muttered, and choked into silence again.

"That's it, Richard, that's common sense," she said, squeezing my fingers. "It's all perfectly plain. As duty always is, thank the Lord. He wants a bright, active, capable wife—if he wants any. A blind old woman can't be that. She can't be, even if she had the heart. I'm a silly, Richard, for all my sour ways. Poor man, poor volatile generous creature. He's not quiet and stay-at-home, as his age should be. He's all capers, and fancies, and—and romance. God bless me, romance! . . . And that's the end of it."

She stayed; and we heard a light restless footfall upon the gravel beneath the window.

"I never thought I should be saying all this stuff to you; I had no such intention, Richard. But you're of my own blood, and that's something. And now off to bed with you, and not another word. Out with him at ten, and back with him at twelve. And my boxes at the week's end."

"Look here, my dear aunt——" I began.

"You are going to tell me," she said, "that it's all my fancy; that my eyes are as good as yours; that I shall wreck our old friend's happiness. My dear Richard, do you suppose that my questions to the little snuff-coloured oculist were not sharp and to the

point? Do you think life has not given me the courage to know that one's eyesight is at least as precious and mortal as one's heart? Do you think that an old woman, who was never idle in learning, has not by this time read through and through your old friend's warm, fickle, proud, fantastic heart? There are good things a woman can admire in a man, besides mere stubborn adoration. And the Count has most of 'em. So you see, you would have told me only what ninety-nine young men would have told me nearly as well. I think too much of you to listen to it. The hundredth for me. There, give me a kiss and go away, Richard. I wish to retire."

My aunt rose hastily, kissed me sharply on the cheek, hurried me out of the room, and locked the door after me.

While sitting there in her presence, I had almost failed to see the folly of the business. Her pitiless commonsense had made me an unwilling accomplice. But as I turned over our talk in my mind, I was tempted at once to betray her secret to the Count. He, too, could be resolute and rational and inflexible at need. Nevertheless, I realised how futile, how fatal the attempt might prove.

To the letter then, I determined to obey her, trusting to the Count's genius and the placability of fate for a happier conclusion. And even at that—a young man a good deal incensed with the ridiculous obligations these two elderly victims had thrust upon him found sleep that night very stubborn of attainment.

I had little expected to see my aunt at breakfast next morning; but when the Count came in from the

garden, hot and boisterous, she sat waiting for him, and greeted us with her usual cheerful gravity. Only too clearly, however, my new knowledge revealed the tragic truth of her secret of the night before. She leaned forward a little on the table, gazing steadily across it, her hands wandering lightly over the cups, already half endowed with the delicacy at length to come. Never had the Count been so high-spirited, and she answered him jest for jest. Yet not one sign did she vouchsafe to assure me of our compact. She acted her part without a symptom of flinching to the end.

In a rather clumsy fashion, I fear, I at last proposed to the Count a walk over the Heath.

"An excellent suggestion, Richard," said my aunt cordially. "There, Count, put on your hat, and take your stick, and walk off the steam. It's no use looking at *me*. I have business to attend to, so *I* can't come."

But the Count was exceedingly unwilling to go. The garden held more charm for him, and better company. A faint groping uneasiness, too, showed itself in his features.

But my aunt would heed no scruples, no reluctances. "When a woman wants a man out of the way, don't you suppose, Count, that she knows best?" she enquired lightly but firmly. "Now where's your stick?"

In her eagerness she stumbled against the door-post, and the Count caught her impulsively by the arm. Her cheek flushed crimson. For an instant I fancied that fate had indeed intervened. But the next minute the Count and I were hurried out of the house,

and bound for the Heath. My aunt had herself shut the door, and, heavy with fears and forebodings, I supposed that this was the end of the matter.

It was a quiet summer morning, the sunshine sweet with the nutty and almond scents of bracken and gorse. At first, in our walk, the Count was inclined to be satirical. He scoffed at every remark I made, and scoffed at his scoffing. But at the bottom of the hollow his mood swerved to the opposite extreme. He walked, bent morosely, without raising his eyes from the grass. His only answer to every little remark I volunteered was a shrug or a grunt. His pace diminished more and more until at last he suddenly stopped, as if some one had spoken to him. And he turned his face towards home.

"What's wrong?" he said to me.

"Wrong?" said I.

"I heard your aunt calling."

"Nonsense," I said; "she's two miles distant at least."

"'Nonsense'!" said he angrily: "I say I *heard* her calling. Am I *all* skin and bone? I'm done with the Heath."

I remonstrated in vain. It only served to make things worse. At each word the Count's disquietude increased, he was the more obstinately bent on returning.

"Home, boy, home! I'll not be gainsaid."

I threatened to go on alone; but the threat, I knew, was futile, and proved me at my last resource.

It was not until we were within a few yards of the house that, on turning a corner, we came in sight of

the cab. With a sagacity that almost amounted to divination, the Count jumped at once to the cause of its presence there.

"What's it mean?" he hoarsely shouted, and waved his stick in the air. "What's that cab mean, I say? What's it mean? Have you no answer, eh?" But after that one swift white glance at my face, he said no more. "Bring that box into the house, sir," he bawled to the cabman, "and drive your cab to the devil."

I followed him into the house, and the tempest of his wrath raged through it like a cloud. My aunt was not in the dining-room. Janet had fled away into the kitchen. And I suppose by this time my aunt had heard the uproar of his home-coming, for when the Count assailed her door it was secure, and she was in a stronghold.

"Mrs. Lindsay! what's this mean?" he shouted. "What have I done, that you should be leaving my house like this? Am I so far in my dotage that I must be cheated like a child? Is it open with me? You shall not go. You shall not go. I'll burn the cab first. You daren't face me, Mrs. Lindsay."

"Count, Count," said I, "every word—the neighbours."

"The neighbours! the neighbours!" his scorn broke over me. "Look to your own pottering milksop business, sir! Now, Mrs. Lindsay, now!"

In envious admiration I heard my aunt open her door. For an instant there was no sound in the house.

"Count," she said, "I will just ask you to go quietly down to your study and remain there for

five minutes. By that time I shall be ready to say good-bye to you."

"Lucy, my dear friend," said the Count—and the resentment was gone out of his voice—"I am only one thing: you will not treat me like this?"

"Five minutes, Count, five minutes," said my aunt.

The Count came downstairs. He paid no heed to me; went into his study and shut the door. The cabman was on the doorstep.

"Richard," said my aunt from the loop of the stairs, "the cabman will carry out my orders."

I went up slowly and tapped at my aunt's door. She would not open to me.

"You have failed, Richard, that is all; a man can do worse," she called to me from the other side of the panels.

"He insisted, aunt," I pleaded. "I almost used force."

"I don't doubt it," she said; "you used all the force that was in you. There, leave me now. I have other things to think about."

"On my word of honour, believe me or not, Aunt Lucy," I cried, "I have done my best. 'I hear him calling'—that's what he kept saying: and home he came. I would have given anything. Let me tell him I saw his face just now. Aunt Lucy, he's an old man,"

"Listen, Richard," she answered, and she was pressing close to the door. "Say no more. I spoke hastily. I have thought it out; the day will pass; and all the noise and fret over. But, but—are you there, Richard?" She whispered in so low a voice

that I could scarcely catch the words, "I go because I'm tired of it all ; want liberty, ease : tell him that. 'Just like a woman !' say ; anything that sounds best to rid him of this—fancy. Do you see ?—and not a single word about the eyes. Richard ! do you see ? You have failed me once. I am trusting you again. That's all."

So I went down and sat a while with my own thoughts to entertain me, in the little room with the French windows and the stuffed birds. In a few minutes I heard my aunt's footsteps descending the stairs. She was all but groping her way with extreme caution, step by step. Veil or bonnet, I know not what, had added years to her face. I had not heard the Count open his door. But in a flash I caught sight of him, on the threshold, stiff as a mute.

"Lucy," he said, "listen. For all that I said—for an old man's noise and fury—forgive me ! That is past. My dear friend, all that I ask now is this—will you be my wife ?"

My aunt's eyebrows were arched above her spectacles. She smoothed her wrinkled forehead with her fingers. "What did you say, Count ?" she said.

"I said I am sorry—beyond all words. And oh, my dear, dear lady, will you be my wife ?"

"Ach—nonsense, nonsense, old friend," said my aunt. "And you and me so old and staid ! Grey hairs. Withered sticks. From the bottom of my heart I thank you for the honour. But—why, Count, you discommode an—an old woman." She laughed like a girl.

And she pushed her gloved hand along the wall

of the passage, moving very heedfully and slowly. "Richard, may I ask you just once more to support my poor gouty knees down these odious steps?" My aunt was speaking in a foreign tongue. The Count strode after us.

"Is this all?" said he, gazing into her face.

"God bless the man!—would he stare me out of countenance?" Her hand felt limp and cold beneath her glove. And we went out of the house into the sunlight, and descended slowly to the cab.

And that was the end of the matter. My aunt had divined the truth. Her volatile, fickle, proud, fantastic old friend moped for a while. But soon the intervention of scribbling, projects, books, and dissensions with his neighbours added this one more to many another romantic episode in his charming repertory of memories. Moreover, had my aunt chosen to return, here was a brotherly affection, flavoured with a platonic piquancy, eager to welcome, to serve, and to entertain her.

Not for many a year did I meet my aunt again. I twice ventured to call on her; but she was "out" to me. Rumours strayed my way at times of a soured blind old woman, for ever engaged in scandalous contention with the parents of her domestics; but me she altogether ignored. And then for a long time I feared to force myself on her memory. But when the end came, and the Count was speedily sinking, some odd remembrance of her troubled his sleep. He begged me to write to my aunt, to 'ask her to come and share a last crust with an old, broken, toothless friend.' But my poor old friend

died the next evening, and the last stillness had fallen upon the house before she could answer his summons.

On the day following I was sitting in the empty and darkened dining-room, when I heard the sound of wheels, and somehow divining what they portended, I looked out through the Venetian blind.

My aunt had come, as she had gone, in a hackney cab ; and, refusing any assistance from the maid who was there with her, she stepped painfully down out of it, and, tapping the ground at her feet with her ebony stick, the wintry sun glinting red upon her blue spectacles as she moved, she began to climb the flight of steps alone, with difficulty, but with a vigorous assurance.

I was seized with dismay at the very sight of her. Something in her very appearance filled me with a sense of my own mere young-manliness and fatuity. I drew sharply back from the window ; hesitated—in doubt whether to receive her myself, or to send for Mrs. Rodd. I peeped again. She had come on slowly. But now, midway up the steps, she paused, slowly turned herself about, and stretched out her hand towards the house.

“Cabman, cabman”—her words rang against the stucco walls—“is this the house ? What’s wrong with the house ?”

The cabman began to climb down from his box.

“Agnes, do you hear me ?” she cried with a shrill piercing horror in her voice. “Agnes, Agnes—is the house *dark* ?”

“The blinds are all down, m’m,” answered the girl looking out of the window.

My aunt turned her head slowly, and I could see her moving eyebrows arched high above her spectacles. And then she began to climb rapidly backwards down the steps in her haste to be gone. It was a ludicrous and yet a poignant and dreadful thing to see. I could refrain myself no longer.

But she was already seated in the cab before I could reach her. "Aunt, my dear Aunt Lucy," I said at the window, peering into the musty gloom. "Won't you please come into the house? I have many things—a ring—books—he spoke often—"

She turned and confronted me, in very speechless entreaty in her blind face—an entreaty not to me, for no earthly help, past all hope of answer, it seemed; and then, with an extraordinary certainty of aim, she began beating my hand that lay upon the narrow window-frame with the handle of her ebony stick.

"Drive on, drive on!" she cried. "God bless the man, why doesn't he drive on?" The jet butterflies in her bonnet trembled above her crimsoned brow. The cabman brandished his whip. And that was quite the end. I never saw my aunt again.

THE LOOKING-GLASS

FOR an hour or two in the afternoon, Miss Lennox had always made it a rule to retire to her own room for a little rest, so that for this brief interval, at any rate, Alice was at liberty to do just what she pleased with herself. The "just what she pleased," no doubt, was a little limited in range ; and "with herself" was at best no very vast oasis amid its sands.

She might, for example, like Miss Lennox, rest, too, if she pleased. Miss Lennox prided herself on her justice.

But then, Alice could seldom sleep in the afternoon because of her troublesome cough. She might at a pinch write letters, but they would need to be nearly all of them addressed to imaginary correspondents. And not even the most romantic of young human beings can write on indefinitely to one who vouchsafes *no* kind of an answer. The choice in fact merely amounted to that between being "in" or "out" (in *any* sense), and now that the severity of the winter had abated, Alice much preferred the solitude of the garden to the vacancy of the house.

With rain came an extraordinary beauty to the narrow garden—its trees drenched, refreshed, and glittering at break of evening, its early flowers stooping pale above the darkened earth, the birds that haunted there singing as if out of a cool and happy cloister—the stormcock wildly jubilant. There was one particular thrush on one particular tree which you might say all but yelled messages at Alice, mes-

sages which sometimes made her laugh, and sometimes almost ready to cry, with delight.

And yet ever the same vague influence seemed to haunt her young mind. Scarcely so much as a mood ; nothing in the nature of a thought ; merely an influence —like that of some impressive stranger met—in a dream, say—long ago, and now half-forgotten.

This may have been in part because the low and foundering wall between the empty meadows and her own recess of greenery had always seemed to her like the boundary between two worlds. On the one side freedom, the wild ; on this, Miss Lennox, and a sort of captivity. There Reality ; here (her “duties” almost forgotten) the confines of a kind of waking dream. For this reason, if for no other, she at the same time longed for and yet in a way dreaded the afternoon’s regular reprieve.

It had proved, too, both a comfort and a vexation that the old servant belonging to the new family next door had speedily discovered this little habit, and would as often as not lie in wait for her between a bush of lilac and a bright green chestnut that stood up like a dense umbrella midway along the wall that divided Miss Lennox’s from its one neighbouring garden. And since apparently it was Alice’s destiny in life to be always precariously balanced between extremes, Sarah had also turned out to be a creature of rather peculiar oscillations of temperament.

Their clandestine talks were, therefore, though frequent, seldom particularly enlightening. None the less, merely to see this slovenly ponderous woman enter the garden, self-centred, with a kind of dull

arrogance, her louring face as vacant as contempt of the Universe could make it, was an event ever eagerly, though at times vexatiously, looked for, and seldom missed.

Until but a few steps separated them, it was one of Sarah's queer habits to make believe, so to speak, that Alice was not there at all. Then, as regularly, from her place of vantage on the other side of the wall, she would slowly and heavily lift her eyes to her face, with a sudden energy which at first considerably alarmed the young girl, and afterwards amused her. For certainly you *are* amused in a sort of fashion when any stranger you might suppose to be a little queer in the head proves perfectly harmless. Alice did not exactly like Sarah. But she could no more resist her advances, than the garden could resist the coming on of night.

Miss Lennox, too, it must be confessed, was a rather tedious and fretful companion for wits (like Alice's) always wool-gathering—wool, moreover, of the shimmering kind that decked the Golden Fleece. Her own conception of the present was of a niche in Time from which she was accustomed to look back on the dim, though once apparently garish, panorama of the past; while with Alice, Time had kept promises enough only for a surety of its immense resources—resources illimitable, even though up till now they had been pretty tightly withheld.

Or, if you so preferred, as Alice would say to herself, you could put it that Miss Lennox had all her eggs in a real basket, and that Alice had all hers in a basket that was *not* exactly real—only problematical.

All the more reason, then, for Alice to think it a little queer that it had been Miss Lennox herself and not Sarah who had first given shape and substance to her vaguely bizarre intuitions concerning the garden—a walled-in space in which one might suppose intuition alone could discover anything in the least remarkable

“When my cousin, Mary Wilson (the Wilsons of Aberdeen, as I may have told you), when my cousin lived in this house,” she had informed her young companion, one evening over her own milk and oatmeal biscuits, “there was a silly talk with the maids that it was haunted.”

“The house?” Alice had enquired, with a sudden crooked look on a face that Nature, it seemed, had definitely intended to be frequently startled; “The house?”

“I didn’t say the *house*,” Miss Lennox testily replied—it always annoyed her to see anything resembling a flush on her young companion’s cheek, “and even if I did, I certainly *meant* the garden. If I had meant the house, I should have used the word *house*. I meant the garden. It was quite unnecessary to correct or contradict me; and whether or not, it’s all the purest rubbish—just a tale, though not the only one of the kind in the world, I fancy.”

“Do you remember any of the other tales?” Alice had enquired, after a rather prolonged pause.

“No, none”; was the flat reply.

And so it came about that to Sarah (though she could hardly be described as the Serpent of the situation) to Sarah fell the opportunity of enjoying to the

full an opening for her fantastic "lore." By insinuation, by silences, now with contemptuous scepticism, now with enormous warmth, she cast her spell, weaving an eager imagination through and through with the rather gaudy threads of superstition.

"Lor, no, *Crimes*, maybe not, though blood is in the roots for all *I* can say." She had looked up almost candidly in the warm, rainy wind, her deadish-looking hair blown back from her forehead.

"Some'll tell you only the old people have eyes to see the mystery ; and some, old or young, if so be they're ripe. Nothing to me either way ; I'm gone past such things. And *what* it is, 'orrer and darkness, or golden like a saint in heaven, or pictures in dreams, or just like dying fireworks in the air, the Lord alone knows, Miss, for I don't. But this I *will* say," and she edged up her body a little closer to the wall, the raindrops the while dropping softly on bough and grass, "May-day's the day, and midnight's the hour, for such as be wakeful and brazen and stoopid enough to watch it out. And what you've got to look for in a manner of speaking is what comes up out of the darkness from behind them trees there!"

She drew back cunningly.

The conversation was just like clockwork. It recurred regularly—except that there was no need to wind anything up. It wound itself up over-night, and with such accuracy that Alice soon knew the complete series of question and answer by heart or by rote—as if she had learned them out of the Child's Guide to Knowledge, or the Catechism. Still there were interesting points in it even now.

'And what you've got to look for'—the *you* was so absurdly impersonal when muttered in that thick coarse privy voice. And Alice invariably smiled at this little juncture ; and Sarah as invariably looked at her and swallowed.

"But have *you* looked for—for what you say, you know?" Alice would then enquire, still with face a little averted towards the black low-boughed group of broad-leaved chestnuts, positive candelabra in their own season of wax-like speckled blossom.

"Me? Me? I was old before my time, they used to say. Why, besides my poor sister up in Yorkshire there, there's not a mouth utters my name." Her large flushed face smiled in triumphant irony. "Besides my bed-rid mistress there, and my old what they call feeble-minded sister, Jane Mary, in Yorkshire, I'm as good as in my grave. I may be dull and hot in the head at times, but I stand *alone*—eat alone, sit alone, sleep alone, think alone. There's never been such a lonely person before. Now, what should such a lonely person as me, Miss, I ask you, or what should you either for that matter, be meddling with your Maydays and your haunted gardens for?" She broke off and stared with angry confusion around her, and, lifting up her open hand a little, she added hotly, "Them birds!—My God, I drats 'em for their squealin'!"

"But, why?" said Alice, frowning slightly.

"The Lord only knows, Miss; I hate the sight of 'em! If I had what they call a blunderbuss in me hand I'd blow 'em to ribbings."

And Alice never could quite understand why it

was that the normal pronunciation of the word would have suggested a less complete dismemberment of the victims.

It was on a bleak day in March that Alice first heard really explicitly the conditions of the quest.

"Your hows and whys ! What I say is I'm sick of it all. Not so much of you, Miss, which is all greens to me, but of the rest of it all ! Anyhow, *fast* you must, like the Cartholics, and you with a frightful hacking cough and all. Come like a new-begotten bride you must in a white gown, and a wreath of lillies or torringe-blossom in your hair, same pretty much as I made for my mother's coffin this twenty years ago, and which I wouldn't do now not for respectability even. And me and my mother, let me tell you, were as close as hens in a roost. . . . But I'm off me subject. There you sits, even if the snow itself comes sailing in on your face, and alone you must be, neither book nor candle, and the house behind you shut up black abed and asleep. But, there ; you so wan and sickly a young lady. What ghost would come to you, I'd like to know. You want some fine dark loveyer for a ghost—that's your ghost. Oo-ay ! There's not a want in the world but's dust and ashes. That's my bit of schooling."

She gazed on impenetrably at Alice's slender fingers. And without raising her eyes she leaned her large hands on the wall, "Meself, Miss, meself 's *my* ghost, as they say. Why, bless me ! it's all thro' the place now, like smoke."

What was all through the place now like smoke Alice perceived to be the peculiar clarity of the air

discernible in the garden at times. The clearness as it were of glass, of a looking-glass, which conceals all behind and beyond it, returning only the looker's wonder, or simply her vanity, or even her gaiety. Why, for the matter of that, thought Alice smiling, there are people who look into looking-glasses, actually see themselves there, and yet never turn a hair.

There *wasn't* any glass, of course. Its sort of mirage sprang only out of the desire of her eyes, out of a restless hunger of the mind—just to possess her soul in patience till the first favourable May evening came along and then once and for all to set everything at rest. It was a thought which fascinated her so completely, that it influenced her habits, her words, her actions. She even began to long for the afternoon solely to be alone with it ; and in the midst of the reverie it charmed into her mind, she would glance up as startled as a Dryad to see the "cook-general's" dark face fixing its still cold gaze on her from over the moss-greened wall. As for Miss Lennox, she became testier and more "rational" than ever as she narrowly watched the day approaching when her need for a new companion would become extreme.

Who, however, the lover might be, and where the trysting-place, was unknown even to Alice, though, maybe, not absolutely unsurmised by her, and with a kind of cunning perspicacity perceived only by Sarah.

"I see my old tales have tickled you up, Miss," she said one day, lifting her eyes from the clothes-line she was carrying to the girl's alert and mobile

face. "What they call old wives' tales I fancy, too."

"Oh, I don't think so," Alice answered. "I can hardly tell, Sarah. I am only at peace *here*, I know that. I get out of bed at night to look down from the window and wish myself here. When I'm reading, just as if it were a painted illustration—in the book, you know—the scene of it all floats in between me and the print. Besides, I can do just what I like with it. In my mind, I mean. I just imagine ; and there it all is. So you see I could not bear *now* to go away."

"There's no cause to worry your head about that," said the woman darkly, "and as for picking and choosing I never saw much of it for them that's under of a thumb. Why, when *I* was young, I couldn't have borne to live as I do now with just meself wandering to and fro. Muttering I catch meself, too. And, to be sure, surrounded in the air by shapes, and shadows, and noises, and winds, so as sometimes I can neither see nor hear. It's true, God's gospel, Miss—the body's like a clump of wood, it's that dull. And you can't get t'other side, so to speak."

So lucid a pourtrayal of her own exact sensations astonished the girl. "Well, but what is it, what is it, Sarah ?"

Sarah strapped the air with the loose end of the clothes-line. "Part, Miss, the hauntin' of the garden. Part as them black-jacketed clergymen would say, because we's we. And part 'cos it's all death the other side—all death."

She drew her head slowly in, her puffy cheeks glowed, her small black eyes gazed as fixedly and deadly as if they were anemones on a rock.

The very fulness of her figure seemed to exaggerate her vehemence. She gloated—a heavy somnolent owl puffing its feathers. Alice drew back, swiftly glancing as she did so over her shoulder. The sunlight was liquid wan gold in the meadow, between the black tree-trunks. They lifted their cumbrous branches far above the brick human house, stooping their leafy twigs. A starling's dark iridescence took her glance as he minced pertly in the coarse grass.

"I can't quite see why *you* should think of death," Alice ventured to suggest.

"Me? Not me! Where I'm put, I stay. I'm like a stone in the grass, I am. Not that if I were that old mealy-smilin' bag of bones flat on her back on her bed up there with her bits of beadwork and slops through a spout, I wouldn't make sure over-night of not being waked next mornin'. There's something in me that won't let me rest, what they call a volcano, though no more to eat in that beetle cupboard of a kitchen than would keep a Tom Cat from the mange."

"But, Sarah," said Alice, casting a glance up at the curtained windows of the other house, "she looks such a quiet, *patient* old thing. I don't think I could stand having not even enough to eat. Why do you stay?"

Sarah laughed for a full half-minute in silence, staring at Alice meanwhile. "'Patient'!" she replied at last, "Oo-ay. Nor to my knowledge did I ever breathe the contrary. As for staying; you'd stay all right if that loveyer of yours come along. You'd stand anything—them pale narrow-chested kind; though me, I'm neether to bend nor break. And if

the old man was to look down out of the blue up there this very minute, ay, and shake his fist at me, I'd say it to his face. I loathe your whining psalm-singers. A trap's a trap. You wait and see!"

"But how do you mean?" Alice said slowly, her face stooping.

There came no answer. And, on turning, she was surprised to see the bunchy alpaca-clad woman already disappearing round the corner of the house.

The talk softly subsided in her mind like the dust in an empty room. Alice wandered on in the garden, extremely loth to go in. And gradually a curious happiness at last descended upon her heart, like a cloud of morning dew in a dell of wild-flowers. It seemed in moments like these, as if she had been given the power to think—or rather to be conscious, as it were, of thoughts not her own—thoughts like vivid pictures, following one upon another with extraordinary rapidity and brightness through her mind. As if, indeed, thoughts could be like fragments of glass, reflecting light at their every edge and angle. She stood tiptoe at the meadow wall and gazed greedily into the green fields, and across to the pollard aspens by the waterside. Turning, her eyes recognised clear in the shadow and blue-gray air of the garden her solitude—its solitude. And at once all thinking ceased.

"The Spirit is *me*: *I* haunt this place!" she said aloud, with sudden assurance, and almost in Sarah's own words. "And I don't mind—not the least bit. It can be only my thankful, thankful self that is here. And that can *never* be lost."

She returned to the house, and seemed as she moved to see—almost as if she were looking down out of the sky on herself—her own dwarf figure walking beneath the trees. Yet there was at the same time a curious individuality in the common things, living and inanimate, that were peeping at her out of their secrecy. The silence hung above them as apparent as their own clear reflected colours above the brief Spring flowers. But when she stood tidying herself for the usual hour of reading to Miss Lennox, she was conscious of an almost unendurable weariness.

That night Alice set to work with her needle upon a piece of sprigged muslin to make her “watch-gown” as Sarah called it. She was excited. She hadn’t much time, she fancied. It was like hiding in a story. She worked with extreme pains, and quickly. And not till the whole flimsy thing was finished did she try on or admire any part of it. But, at last, in the early evening of one of the middle days of April, she drew her bedroom blind up close to the ceiling, to view herself in her yellow grained looking-glass.

The gown, white as milk in the low sunlight, and sprinkled with even whiter embroidered nosegays of daisies, seemed to attenuate a girlish figure, already very slender. She had arranged her abundant hair with unusual care, and her own clear, inexplicable eyes looked back upon her beauty, bright it seemed with tidings they could not speak.

She regarded closely that narrow, flushed, intense face in an unforeseen storm of compassion and regret, as if with the conviction that she herself was to

blame for the inevitable leavetaking. It seemed to gaze like an animal its mute farewell in the dim dis-coloured glass.

And when she had folded and laid away the gown in her wardrobe, and put on her everyday clothes again, she felt an extreme aversion for the garden. So, instead of venturing out that afternoon, she slipped off its faded blue ribbon from an old bundle of letters which she had hoarded all these years from a school-friend long since lost sight of, and spent the evening reading them over, till headache and an empty despondency sent her to bed.

Lagging Time brought at length the thirtieth of April. Life was as usual. Miss Lennox had even begun to knit her eighth pair of woollen mittens for the annual Church bazaar. To Alice the day passed rather quickly ; a cloudy, humid day with a furtive continual and enigmatical stir in the air. Her lips were parched ; it seemed at any moment her skull might crack with the pain as she sat reading her chapter of Macaulay to Miss Lennox's sparkling and clicking needles. Her mind was a veritable rookery of forebodings, flying and returning. She scarcely ate at all, and kept to the house, never even approaching a window. She wrote a long and rather unintelligible letter, which she destroyed when she had read it over. Then suddenly every vestige of pain left her.

And when at last she went to bed—so breathless that she thought her heart at any moment would jump out of her body, and so saturated with expectancy she thought she would die—her candle was left burning calmly, unnodding, in its socket upon the chest of

drawers ; the blind of her window was up, towards the houseless byroad ; her pen stood in the inkpot.

She slept on into the morning of Mayday, in a sheet of eastern sunshine, till Miss Lennox, with a peevishness that almost amounted to resolution, decided to wake her. But then, Alice, though unbeknown in any really conscious sense to herself, perhaps, had long since decided not to be awakened.

Not until the evening of that day did the sun in his diurnal course for a while illumine the garden, and then very briefly : to gild, to lull, and to be gone. The stars wheeled on in the thick-sown waste of space, and even when Miss Lennox's small share of the earth's wild living creatures had stirred and sunk again to rest in the ebb of night, there came no watcher—not even the very ghost of a watcher—to the garden, in a watch-gown. So that what peculiar secrets found reflex in its dark mirror no human witness was there to tell.

As for Sarah, she had long since done with looking-glasses once and for all. A place was a place. There was still the washing to be done on Mondays. Fools and weaklings would continue to come and go. But give her *her* way, she'd have blown them and their looking-glasses all to ribbons—with the birds.

MISS DUVEEN

I SELDOM had the company of children in my grandmother's house beside the river Wandle. The house was old and ugly. But its river was lovely and youthful though it had flowed for ever, it seemed, between its green banks of osier and alder. So it was no great misfortune perhaps that I heard more talking of its waters than of any human tongue. For my grandmother found no particular pleasure in my company. How should she? My father and mother had married (and died) against her will, and there was nothing in me of those charms which, in fiction at any rate, swiftly soften a superannuated heart.

Nor did I pine for her company either. I kept out of it as much as possible.

It so happened that she was accustomed to sit with her back to the window of the room which she usually occupied, her grey old indifferent face looking inwards. Whenever necessary, I would steal close up under it, and if I could see there her large faded amethyst velvet cap I knew I was safe from interruption. Sometimes I would take a slice or two of currant bread or (if I could get it) a jam tart or a cheese cake, and eat it under a twisted old damson tree or beside the running water. And if I conversed with anybody, it would be with myself or with my small victims of the chase.

Not that I was an exceptionally cruel boy ; though if I had lived on for many years in this primitive and companionless fashion, I should surely have become an idiot. As a matter of fact, I was unaware even that

I was ridiculously old-fashioned—manners, clothes, notions, everything. My grandmother never troubled to tell me so, nor did she care. And the servants were a race apart. So I was left pretty much to my own devices. What wonder, then, if I at first accepted with genuine avidity the acquaintanceship of our remarkable neighbour, Miss Duveen?

It had been, indeed, quite an advent in our uneventful routine when that somewhat dubious household moved into Willowlea, a brown brick edifice, even uglier than our own, which had been long vacant, and whose sloping garden confronted ours across the Wandle. My grandmother, on her part, at once discovered that any kind of intimacy with its inmates was not much to be desired. While I, on mine, was compelled to resign myself to the loss of the Willowlea garden as a kind of No Man's Land or Tom Tiddler's ground.

I got to know Miss Duveen by sight long before we actually became friends. I used frequently to watch her wandering in her long garden. And even then I noticed how odd were her methods of gardening. She would dig up a root or carry off a potted plant from one to another overgrown bed with an almost animal-like resolution ; and a few minutes afterwards I would see her restoring it to the place from which it had come. Now and again she would stand perfectly still, like a scarecrow, as if she had completely forgotten what she was at.

Miss Coppin, too, I despaired sometimes. But I never more than glanced at her, for fear that even at that distance the too fixed attention of my eyes might

bring hers to bear upon me. She was a smallish woman, inclined to be fat, and with a peculiar waddling gait. She invariably appeared to be angry with Miss Duveen, and would talk to her as one might talk to a post. I did not know, indeed, until one day Miss Duveen waved her handkerchief in my direction that I had been observed from Willowlea at all. Once or twice after that, I fancied, she called me ; at least her lips moved ; but I could not distinguish what she said. And I was naturally a little backward in making new friends. Still I grew accustomed to looking out for her and remember distinctly how first we met.

It was raining, the raindrops falling softly into the unrippled water, making their great circles, and tapping on the motionless leaves above my head where I sat in shelter on the bank. But the sun was shining whitely from behind a thin fleece of cloud, when Miss Duveen suddenly peeped in at me out of the greenery, the thin silver light upon her face, and eyed me sitting there, for all the world as if she were a blackbird and I a snail. I scrambled up hastily with the intention of retreating into my own domain, but the peculiar grimace she made at me fixed me where I was.

"Ah," she said, with a little masculine laugh, "So this is the young gentleman, the bold, gallant young gentleman. And what might be his name ?"

I replied rather distantly that my name was Arthur.

"Arthur, to be sure !" she repeated with extraordinary geniality, and again, "Arthur," as if in the strictest confidence.

"I know you, Arthur, very well indeed. I have looked, I have watched ; and now, please God, we need never be estranged." And she tapped her brow and breast, making the Sign of the Cross with her lean, bluish forefinger.

"What is a little brawling brook," she went on, "to friends like you and me ?" She gathered up her tiny countenance once more into an incredible grimace of friendliness ; and I smiled as amicably as I could in return. There was a pause in this one-sided conversation. She seemed to be listening, and her lips moved, though I caught no sound. In my uneasiness I was just about to turn stealthily away, when she poked forward again.

"Yes, yes, I know you quite intimately, Arthur. We have met *here*." She tapped her rounded forehead. "You might not suppose it, too ; but I have eyes like a lynx. It is no exaggeration, I assure you—I assure everybody. And now what friends we will be ! At times," she stepped out of her hiding-place and stood in curious dignity beside the water, her hands folded in front of her on her black pleated silk apron—"at times, dear child, I long for company—earthly company." She glanced furtively about her. "But I must restrain my longings ; and you will, of course, understand that I do not complain. *He* knows best. And my dear cousin, Miss Coppin—she too knows best. She does not consider too much companionship expedient for me." She glanced in some perplexity into the smoothly swirling water.

"I, you know," she said suddenly, raising her little piercing eyes to mine, "I am Miss Duveen, that's not,

they say, quite the thing here." She tapped her small forehead again beneath its two sleek curves of grey-ing hair, and made a long narrow mouth at me. "Though, of course," she added, "we do not tell *her* so. No!"

And I, too, nodded my head in instinctive and absorbed imitation. Miss Duveen laughed gaily. "He understands, he understands!" she cried, as if to many listeners. "Oh, what a joy it is in this world, Arthur, to be understood. Now tell me," she continued with immense nicety, "tell me, how's your dear mamma?"

I shook my head.

"Ah," she cried, "I see, I see; Arthur has no mamma. We will not refer to it. No father, either?"

I shook my head again and, standing perfectly still, stared at my new acquaintance with vacuous curios-ity. She gazed at me with equal concentration, as if she were endeavouring to keep the very thought of my presence in her mind.

"It is sad to have no father," she continued rapidly, half closing her eyes; "no head, no guide, no stay, no stronghold; but we have, O yes, we have another father, dear child, another father—eh? . . . Where . . . Where?"

She very softly raised her finger. "On high," she whispered, with extraordinary intensity.

"But just now," she added cheerfully, hugging her mittened hands together, "we are not talking of Him; we are talking of ourselves, just you and me, *So cosy; so secret!* And it's a grandmother? I thought so, I thought so, a grandmother! O yes, I

can peep between the curtains, though they do lock the door. A grandmother—I thought so ; that very droll old lady ! *Such* fine clothes ! Such a presence, oh yes ! A grandmother.” She poked out her chin and laughed confidentially.

“And the long, bony creature, all rub and double”—she jogged briskly with her elbows, “who’s that ?”

“Mrs. Pridgett,” I said.

“There, there,” she whispered breathlessly, gazing widely about her. “Think of that ! *He* knows ; *He* understands. How firm, how manly, how undaunted ! . . . *One t?*”

I shook my head dubiously.

“Why should he ?” she cried scornfully. But between ourselves, Arthur, that is a thing we *must* learn, and never mind the headache. We cannot, of course, know everything. Even Miss Coppin does not know *everything*—” she leaned forward with intense earnestness—“though I don’t tell her so. We must try to learn all we can ; and at once. One thing, dear child, you may be astonished to hear, I learned only yesterday, and that is how exceedingly *sad* life is.”

She leaned her chin upon her narrow bosom pursing her lips. “And yet you know they say very little about it. . . . They don’t *mention* it. Every moment, every hour, every day, every year—one, two, three, four, five, seven, ten,” she paused, frowned, “and so on. Sadder and sadder. Why ? why ? It’s strange, but oh, so true. You really can have no notion, child, how very sad I am myself at times. In the evening, when they all gather together,

in their white raiment, up and up and up, I sit on the garden seat, on Miss Coppin's garden seat, and precisely in the middle (you'll be kind enough to remember that?) and my *thoughts* make me sad." She narrowed her eyes and shoulders. "Yes and frightened, my child ! Why must I be so guarded ? One angel—the greatest *fool* could see the wisdom of that. But billions !—with their fixed eyes shining, so very boldly, on me. I never prayed for so many, dear friend. And we pray for a good many odd things, you and I, I'll be bound. But, there, you see, poor Miss Duveen's on her theology again—scamper, scamper, scamper. In the congregations of the wicked we must be cautious ! . . . Mrs. Partridge and grandmamma, so nice, *so* nice ; but even that, too, a *little* sad, eh ?" She leaned her head questioningly, like a starving bird in the snow.

I smiled, not knowing what else she expected of me ; and her face became instantly grave and set.

"He's right ; perfectly right. We must speak evil of *no-one*. *No-one*. We must shut our mouths. We——" She stopped suddenly and, taking a step leaned over the water towards me, with eyebrows raised high above her tiny face. "S—sh !" she whispered, laying a long forefinger on her lips. "Eavesdroppers !" she smoothed her skirts, straightened her cap, and left me ; only a moment after to poke out her head at me again from between the leafy bushes. "An assignation, no !" she said firmly, then gathered her poor, cheerful, forlorn, crooked, lovable face into a most wonderful contraction at me, that assuredly meant—"But, yes !"

Indeed it was an assignation, the first of how many, and how few. Sometimes Miss Duveen would sit beside me, apparently so lost in thought that I was clean forgotten. And yet I half fancied it was often nothing but feigning. Once she stared me blankly out of countenance when I ventured to take the initiative and to call out Good-morning to her across the water. On this occasion she completed my consternation with a sudden, angry grimace—contempt, jealousy, outrage.

But often we met like old friends and talked. It was a novel but not always welcome diversion for me in the long shady garden that was my privy universe. Where our alders met, mingling their branches across the flowing water, and the kingfisher might be seen—there was our usual tryst. But, occasionally, at her invitation, I would venture across the stepping-stones into her demesne ; and occasionally, but very seldom indeed, she would venture into mine. How plainly I see her, tip-toeing from stone to stone, in an extraordinary concentration of mind —her mulberry petticoats, her white stockings, her loose spring-side boots. And when at last she stood beside me, her mittened hand on her breast, she would laugh on in a kind of paroxysm until the tears stood in her eyes, and she grew faint with breathlessness.

"In all danger," she told me once, "I hold my breath and shut my eyes. And if I could tell you of every danger, I think, perhaps, you would understand—dear Miss Coppin" I did not, and yet, perhaps, very vaguely I did see the connection in this rambling statement.

Like most children, I liked best to hear Miss Duveen talk about her own childhood. I contrived somehow to discover that if we sat near flowers or under boughs in blossom, her talk would generally steal round to that. Then she would chatter on and on : of the white sunny rambling house, somewhere, nowhere—it saddened and confused her if I asked where—in which she had spent her first happy years; where her father used to ride on a black horse ; and her mother to walk with her in the garden in a crino-lined gown and a locket with the painted miniature of a “divine” nobleman inside it. How very far away these pictures seemed !

It was as if she herself had shrunken back into this distant past, and was babbling on like a child again, already a little isolated by her tiny infirmity.

“That was before——” she would begin to explain precisely, and then a crisscross many-wrinkled frown would net her rounded forehead, and cloud her eyes. Time might baffle her, but then, time often baffled me too. Any talk about her mother usually reminded her of an elder sister, Caroline. “My sister, Caroline,” she would repeat as if by rote, “you may not be aware, Arthur, was afterwards Mrs. Bute. *So charming, so exquisite, so accomplished.* And Colonel Bute—an officer and a gentleman, I grant. And yet . . . But no ! My dear sister was *not* happy. And so it was no doubt a blessing in disguise that by an unfortunate accident she was found *drowned*. In a lake, you will understand, not a mere shallow noisy brook. This is one of my private sorrows, which, of course, your grandmamma would be horrified to hear

—horrified ; and which, of course, Partridge has not the privilege of birth even to be informed of—*our* secret, dear child—with all her beautiful hair, and her elegant feet, and her eyes no more ajar than this ; but blue, blue as the forget-me-not. When the time comes, Miss Coppin will close my own eyes, I hope and trust. Death, dear, dear child, I know *they say* is only sleeping. Yet I hope and trust *that*. To be sleeping wide awake ; oh no !” She abruptly turned her small untidy head away.

“But didn’t they shut *hers* ?” I enquired.

Miss Duveen ignored the question. “I am not uttering one word of blame,” she went on rapidly; “I am perfectly aware that such things confuse me. Miss Coppin tells me not to think. She tells me that I can have no opinions worth the mention. She says, ‘Shut up your mouth.’ I must keep silence then. All that I am merely trying to express to you, Arthur, knowing you will regard it as sacred between us—all I am expressing is that my dear sister, Caroline, was a gifted and beautiful creature with not a shadow or vestige or tinge or taint of confusion in her mind. *Nothing*. And yet, when they dragged her out of the water and laid her there on the bank, looking—”She stooped herself double in a sudden dreadful fit of gasping, and I feared for an instant she was about to die.

“No, no, no,” she cried, rocking herself to and fro, “you shall *not* paint such a picture in his young, innocent mind. You *shall not*.”

I sat on my stone, watching her, feeling excessively uncomfortable. “But what *did* she look like, Miss

Duveen?" I pressed forward to ask at last.

"No, no, no," she cried again. "Cast him out, cast him out. *Retro Sathanas!* We must not even *ask* to understand. My father and my dear mother, I do not doubt, have spoken for Caroline. Even I, if I must be called on, will strive to collect my thoughts. And that is precisely where a friend, you, Arthur, would be so precious; to know that you too, in your innocence, will be helping me to collect my thoughts on that day, to save our dear Caroline from Everlasting Anger. That, that! Oh dear: oh dear!" She turned on me a face I should scarcely have recognised, lifted herself trembling to her feet, and hurried away.

Sometimes it was not Miss Duveen that was a child again, but I that had grown up. "Had now you been your handsome father—and I see him, O, so plainly, dear child—had you been your father, then I must, of course, have kept to the house . . . I must have; it is a rule of conduct, and everything depends on them. Where would Society be *else*?" she cried, with an unanswerable blaze of intelligence. "I find, too, dear Arthur, that they increase—the rules increase. I try to remember them. My dear cousin, Miss Coppin, knows them all. But I—I think sometimes one's *memory* is a little treacherous. And then it must vex people."

She gazed penetringly at me for an answer that did not come. Mute as a fish though I might be, I suppose it was something of a comfort to her to talk to me.

And to suppose that is *my* one small crumb of

comfort when I reflect on the kind of friendship I managed to bestow.

I actually met Miss Coppin once ; but we did not speak. I had, in fact, gone to tea with Miss Duveen. The project had been discussed as "quite, quite impossible, dear child" for weeks. "You must never mention it again." As a matter of fact I ~~had~~ never mentioned it at all. But one day—possibly when their charge had been less difficult and exacting, one day Miss Coppin and her gaunt maid-servant and companion really did go out together, leaving Miss Duveen alone in Willowlea. It was the crowning opportunity of our friendship. The moment I espied her issuing from the house, I guessed her errand. She came hastening down to the waterside, attired in clothes of a colour and fashion I had never seen her wearing before, her dark eyes shining in her head, her hands trembling with excitement.

It was a still, warm afternoon, with Sweet Williams and linden and stocks scenting the air, when, with some little trepidation, I must confess, I followed her in formal dignity up the unfamiliar path towards the house. I know not which of our hearts beat the quicker, whose eyes cast the most furtive glances about us. My friend's cheeks were brightest mauve. She wore a large silver locket on a ribbon ; and I followed her up the faded green stairs, beneath the dark pictures, to her small, stuffy bedroom under the roof. We humans, they say, are ~~enveloped in a kind of aura; to which the vast majority of us are certainly entirely insensitive.~~ Nevertheless, there was an air, an atmosphere as of the smell of pears in this

small attic room—well, every bird, I suppose, haunts with its presence its customary cage.

"This," she said, acknowledging the bed, the looking-glass, the deal washstand, "this, dear child, you will pardon; in fact, you will not see. How could we sit, friends as we are, in the congregation of ~~strangers~~?"

I hardly know why, but that favourite word of Miss Duveen's, "congregation," brought up before me with extreme aversion all the hostile hardness and suspicion concentrated in Miss Coppin and Ann. I stared at the queer tea things in a vain effort not to be aware of the rest of Miss Duveen's private belongings.

Somewhat or other she had managed to procure for me a bun—a saffron bun. There was a dish of a gray pudding and a plate of raspberries that I could not help suspecting (and, I am ashamed to say, with aggrieved astonishment), she must have herself gathered that morning from my grandmother's canes. We did not talk very much. Her heart gave her pain. And her face showed how hot and absorbed and dismayed she was over her foolhardy entertainment. But I sipped my milk and water, sitting on a black bandbox, and she on an old cane chair. And we were almost formal and distant to one another, with little smiles and curtseys over our cups, and polished agreement about the weather.

"And you'll strive not to be sick, dear child," she implored me suddenly, while I was nibbling my way slowly through the bun. But it was not until rumours of the tremendous fact of Miss Coppin's early and unforeseen return had been borne in on us that Miss

Duveen lost all presence of mind. She burst into tears ; seized and kissed repeatedly my sticky hands ; implored me to be discreet ; implored me to be gone ; implored me to retain her in my affections, "as you love your poor dear mother, Arthur," and I left her on her knees, her locket pressed to her bosom.

Miss Coppin was, I think, unusually astonished to see a small strange boy walk softly past her bedroom door, within which she sat, with purple face, her hat strings dangling, taking off her boots. Ann, I am thankful to say, I did not encounter. But when I was safely out in the garden in the afternoon sunshine, the boldness and the romance of this sally completely deserted me. I ran like a hare down the alien path, leapt from stone to stone across the river ; nor paused in my flight until I was safe in my own bedroom, and had—how odd is childhood !—washed my face and entirely changed my clothes.

My grandmother, when I appeared at her tea-table, glanced at me now and again rather profoundly and inquisitively, but the actual question hovering in her mind remained unuttered.

It was many days before we met again, my friend and I. She had, I gathered from many mysterious nods and shrugs, been more or less confined to her bedroom ever since our escapade, and looked dulled and anxious ; her small face was even a little more vacant in repose than usual. Even this meeting, too, was full of alarms ; for in the midst of our talk, by mere chance or caprice, my grandmother took a walk in the garden that afternoon, and discovered us under our damson tree. She bowed in her dignified, aged way.

And Miss Duveen, with cheeks and forehead the colour of her petticoat, elaborately curtseyed.

"Beautiful, very beautiful weather," said my grandmother.

"It is, indeed," said my friend, fixedly.

"I trust you are keeping pretty well?"

"As far, Ma'am, as God and a little weakness of the heart permit," said Miss Duveen. "He knows all," she added, firmly

My grandmother stood silent a moment.

"Indeed he does," she replied politely.

"And that's the difficulty," ventured Miss Duveen, in her odd, furtive, friendly fashion.

My grandmother opened her eyes, smiled pleasantly, paused, glanced remotely at me, and, with another exchange of courtesies, Miss Duveen and I were left alone once more. But it was a grave and saddened friend I now sat beside.

"You see, Arthur, all bad things, we know, are best for us. Motives included. That comforts me. But my heart is sadly fluttered. Not that I fear or would shun society ; but perhaps your grandmother . . . I never had the power to treat my fellow-creatures as if they were stocks and stones. And the effort not to notice it distresses me. A little hartshorn might relieve the *palpitation*, of course ; but Miss Coppin keeps all keys. It is this shouting that makes civility such a task."

"This shouting"—very faintly then I caught her meaning, but I was in no mood to sympathise. My grandmother's one round-eyed expressionless glance at me had been singularly disconcerting. And it was

only apprehension of her questions that kept me from beating a retreat. So we sat on, Miss Duveen and I, in the shade, the day drawing towards evening, and presently we walked down to the water-side, and under the colours of sunset I flung in my crumbs to the minnows, as she talked ceaselessly on.

"And yet," she concluded, after how involved a monologue, "and yet, Arthur, I feel it is for your forgiveness I should be pleading. So much to do; such an arch of beautiful things might have been my gift to you. It is here," she said, touching her forehead. "I do not think, perhaps, that all I might say would be for your good. I must be silent and discreet about much. I must not provoke"—she lifted her mittened finger, and raised her eyes—"Them," she said gravely. "I am tempted, terrified, persecuted. Whispering, wrangling, shouting: the flesh is a grievous burden, Arthur; I long for peace. Only to flee away and be at rest! But," she nodded, and glanced over her shoulder, "about much—great trials, sad entanglements, about much the Others say, I must keep silence. It would only alarm your innocence. And that I will never, *never* do. Your father, a noble, gallant gentleman of the world, would have understood my difficulties. But he is dead Whatever that may mean. I have repeated it so often when Miss Coppin thought that I was not—dead, dead, dead, dead—but I don't think that even now I grasp the meaning of the word. Of you, dear child, I will never say it. You have been life itself to me."

How generously, how tenderly she smiled on me from her perplexed, sorrowful eyes.

"You have all the world before you, all the world. How splendid it is to be a Man. For my part I have sometimes thought, though they do not of course intend to injure me, yet I fancy, sometimes, they have grudged me *my* part in it a little. Though God forbid but Heaven's best."

She raised that peering, dark, remote gaze to my face, and her head was trembling again. "They are saying now to one another—*'Where is she? where is she? It's nearly dark, m'm, where is she?'* O, Arthur, but there shall be no night *there*. We must believe it, we must—in spite, dear friend, of a weak horror of glare. My cousin, Miss Coppin, does not approve of my wishes. Gas, gas, gas, all over the house, and when it is not singing, it roars. You would suppose I might be trusted with but just my own one bracket. But no—Ann, I think—indeed I fear, sometimes, has no—" She started violently and shook her tiny head. "When I am gone," she continued disjointedly, "you will be prudent, cautious, dear child? Consult only your heart about me. Older you must be . . . Yes, certainly, he must be older," she repeated vaguely. "Everything goes on and on—and round!" She seemed astonished, as if at a sudden radiance cast on an old and protracted perplexity.

"About your soul, dear child," she said to me once, touching my hand, "I have never spoken. Perhaps it was one of my first duties to keep on speaking to you about your soul. I mention it now in case they should rebuke me when I make my appearance there. It is a burden; and I have so many

burdens, as well as pain. And at times I cannot think very far. I *see* the thought; but it won't alter. It comes back, just like a sheep — 'Ba-aa-ab,' like that!" She burst out laughing, twisting her head to look at me the while. "Miss Coppin, of course, has no difficulty; gentlemen have no difficulty. And this shall be the occasion of another of our little confidences. We are discreet?" She bent her head and scanned my face. "Here," she tapped her bosom, "I bear his image. My only dear one's. And if you would kindly turn your head, dear child, perhaps I could pull him out."

It was the miniature of a young, languid, fastidious-looking officer which she showed me—threaded on dingy tape, in its tarnished locket.

"Miss Coppin, in great generosity, has left me this," she said, polishing the glass on her knee, "though I am forbidden to wear it. For you see, Arthur, it is a duty not to brood on the past, and even perhaps, indelicate. Some day, it may be, you, too, will love a gentle girl. I beseech you, keep your heart pure and true. This ~~one~~ could not. Not a single word of blame escapes me. I own to my Maker, never to anyone else, it has noteased my little difficulty. But it is not for us to judge. Whose office is that, eh?" And again, that lean small fore-finger, beneath an indescribable grimace, pointed gently, deliberately, from her lap upward. "Pray, pray," she added, very violently, "pray, till the blood streams down your face! Pray, but rebuke not. They all whisper about it. Among themselves," she added, peering out beneath and between the interlacing branches. "But

I simulate inattention. I simulate . . ." The very phrase seemed to have hopelessly confused her. Again, as so often now, that glassy fear came into her eyes ; her foot tapped on the gravel.

"Arthur," she cried suddenly, taking my hand tightly in her lap, "you have been my refuge in a time of trouble. You will never know it, child. My refuge, and my peace. We shall seldom meet now. All are opposed. They repeat it in their looks. The Autumn will divide us ; and then, Winter ; but, I think, no Spring. It is so, Arthur, there is a stir ; and then they will hunt me out." Her eyes gleamed again, far and small and black in the dusky pallor of her face.

It was indeed already Autumn ; the air golden and still. The leaves were beginning to fall. The late fruits were well-nigh over. Robins and tits seemed our only birds now. Rain came in floods. The Wandle took sound and volume, sweeping deep above our stepping stones. Very seldom after this I even so much as saw our neighbour. I chanced on her one still afternoon, standing fixedly by the brawling stream, in a rusty-looking old-fashioned cloak, her scanty hair pushed high up on her forehead.

She stared at me for a moment or two, and then, with a scared look over her shoulder, threw me a little letter, shaped like a cock-hat, and weighted with a pebble stone, across the stream. She whispered earnestly and rapidly at me over the water. But I could not catch a single word she said, and failed to decipher her close spidery handwriting. No doubt I was too shy, or too ashamed, or in a vague fashion

too loyal, to show it to my grandmother. It is not now a flattering keepsake. I called out loudly I must go in ; and still see her gazing after me, with a puzzled, mournful expression on the face peering out of the cloak.

Even after that we sometimes waved to one another across the water, but never if by hiding myself I could evade her in time. The distance seemed to confuse her, and quite silenced me. I began to see we were ridiculous friends, especially as she came now in ever dingier and surdier clothes. She even looked hungry, and not quite clean, as well as ill ; and she talked more to her phantoms than to me when once we met.

The first ice was in the garden. The trees stood bare beneath a pale blue sunny sky, and I was standing at the window, looking out at the hoar-frost, when my grandmother told me that it was unlikely that I should ever see our neighbour again.

I stood where I was, without turning round, staring out of the window at the motionless ghostly trees, and the few birds in forlorn unease.

"Is she dead, then ?" I enquired.

"I am told," was the reply, "that her friends have been compelled to have her put away. No doubt, it was the proper course. It should have been done earlier. But it is not our affair, you are to understand. And, poor creature, perhaps death would have been a happier, a more merciful release. She was sadly afflicted."

I said nothing, and continued to stare out of the window.

But I know now that the news, in spite of a vague sorrow, greatly relieved me. I should be at ease in the garden again, came the thought—no longer fear to look ridiculous, and grow hot when our neighbour was mentioned, or be saddled with her company beside the stream.

SELINA'S PARABLE

ON the wide wooden staircase that led up to her big sea-windy bedroom in the old house in which Selina was staying was a low, square window. For Selina, every window in her small private world had a charm, an incantation all its own. Was it not an egress for her eye to a scene of some beauty, or life, or of forbiddingness ; was it not the way of light ; either her own outward, or the world's inward ? This small window in particular beguiled Selina, because, kneeling there (it was of too narrow a frame to permit a protracted standing or stooping) she looked out of it, and down from it, upon a farm-yard. Selina knew farmyards that more seductively soothed her æsthetic sense—farmyards of richer ricks, of solider outbuildings, of a deeper peace. But since this farmyard, despite its litter and bareness, was busy with life—dog in kennel, chicken, duck, goose, gander and goslings, doves, a few wild birds, some even of the sea, an occasional horse and man—contemplation of it solaced her small mind, keeping it gently busy, and yet in a state narrowly bordering on trance.

Selina was dark and narrow-shouldered, with eyes of so intense a brown that, when the spirit that lurked behind them was absorbed in what they gazed on, they were like two small black pools of water. And one long, warm, languorous afternoon she found herself kneeling once again at the low staircase window even more densely engrossed than usual. At the bottom of the farmyard, perhaps twenty paces

distant, stood a low stone barn or granary, its square door opening blackly into the sunlight upon a flight of, maybe, ten rough and weed-tousled stone steps. Beyond its roof stretched the green dreaming steeps of the valley. From this door, it was the farmer's wont, morning and evening, to feed his winged stock.

On this particular afternoon the hour was but hard on four. Something unusual was afoot. Selina watched the farmer ponderously traverse the yard, and, in his usual stout Alexander-Selkirkian fashion, ascend into the granary. Surely not thus unseasonably to dispense the good grain, but for some purpose or purposes unknown—unknown at least to Selina.

Nevertheless, all his chickens, such is faith, instinct, habit and stupidity, had followed close upon his heels, and were now sleekly and expectantly clustered in mute concourse upon the steps and on the adjacent yard-stones, precisely like an assemblage of humanity patiently waiting to be admitted into the pit of a theatre or into the nave of a church.

There was a dramatic pause. The sun shone on. The blue seemed to deepen. A few late-comers flurried in from the byways and hedges. The rest of the congregation was steadfast—with just a feverish effort apparent here and there of some one jealous individual to better her position at the expense of those more favourably situated. Then, after a prolonged interval, the square door was reopened, and the farmer emerged, empty-handed and apparently unconscious of the expectant assemblage awaiting him. Without so much as a glance of compassion or even of heed, he trod heavily down the stone steps

through the assembled hens, careless to all appearance whether his swinging, cumbrous boots trod the more eager underfoot, and—wonder of wonders!—he left the door behind him, and at its very fullest gape.

Selina sighed : the happiest of sighs, that of expectation and forbidden delight. It was as if the commissionnaire of the theatre or the gaitered archdeacon of the cathedral had simply betrayed his edifice, and its treasures, to the mob. God bless me, thought Selina, they'll go in and help themselves !

Only one moiety of this brilliant speculation of Selina's was to be proved justified. Led by a remarkably neat jimp blue-black Leghorn hen, deliciously feminine and adventurous, churchwarden's helpmeet if ever there was one, the whole feathered mob, as if under the gesture of a magician, with an instantaneous and soundless ingurgitation of appetite and desire, swept upward and in. Threescore hens at least were there, the appropriate leaven of cocks, two couple of ducks, three doves, a few predatory wildings, while the little cluster of geese on the outskirts outstretched their serpentine necks and hissed.

Selina, transfixed there in a felicity bordering upon rapture, watched. Like Athene above the plains of Troy, she gathered in her slim shoulders as if to swoop. What was happening within, beyond that strange square of velvety afternoon darkness ? The rapine, the orgy, the indiscriminate gorge ? Alas, no ! Whether or not the marauders had discerned or even so much as descried the fatted bags of oats and maize and wheat that were undoubtedly shelved within that punctual hostel, Selina could not guess. This only was

perfectly plain—that the concourse was now dejectedly emerging, dispirited and unfed. One by one, in ruffled groups, peevish, crestfallen, damped, the feathered congregation by ones and twos and threes reappeared, trod, or hopped, or fluttered down the shallow familiar disenchanted steps, the ducks, too, dumb and ignoble, the cocks simulating indifference or contempt, the wildlings—as wild as ever.

When Selina, still agape, came to herself, the farm-yard was much as usual—dispersed clusters of huffed, short-memoried and dusting fowl, a pacing cock, the dog, head on paws, still asleep, doves in comparatively dispassionate courtship on the roof, duck and drake guzzling in that unfathomable morass of iniquity known as the duck pond.

“Came to herself”—for Selina’s was a type of mind that cannot but follow things up (as far as ever she could go); it was compelled, that is, by sheer natural impulse, to spin queer little stories out of the actual, and even, alas, to moralise.

“Why,” she mused, “poor hen-brained things, they came to be fed. Always when the farmer opened the door and went in, grain, the bread of life, came out. Always. And he, surely, being a more or less generous creature, capable at *any* moment of magnanimity, and not, gracious goodness, a cold and bloated cynic, since one must at least, *think* the best of what is and may be, why, of course, they simply could not *but* go in, as they did, and, to say the least of it, just see for themselves. You surely can’t impiously raid the *given*. Morning, and possibly afternoon, the poor creatures as best their natural powers allow,

reward the farmer for his benefactions. A little indirectly, perhaps, but surely you wouldn't expect the poor things to reason that he gives—well, what he does give—solely for gain, that his bounty is sheer profiteering, that it is their eggs, their poor carcases, or their positive offspring he is after, for his own—well, to them—immeasurably barbarous purposes.

"Suppose with avid beak (a little magnified, of course) they surge in one day and carry off his last squalling baby—that puffy little Samuel—from his cradle. Suppose they do. It will serve him right: it will be tit for tat. They had believed in him—that was the point. Now they won't: they *can't*—at least not for ten minutes. Though they are always hungry. Yes, they had climbed up, lured on by sheer indifference masquerading as generosity, in the heat of the day, too, and that peculiarly slim and gimp black Leghorn pullet in particular, only to discover—nothing, just cool inner darkness and odoriferous vacancy. Even a horny, fussy old verger would at least have shooed them out again, have told them that they had made a mistake, that there wasn't any extra thing 'on' of that kind—no *confirmation* service, you know." And Selina fleetingly smiled, narrow cheek, delicate lip, and black abstracted eye.

"How very like poor human beings," she went on, pursuing her small privy thoughts, slipping down, as she did so, from kneeling to sitting, and automatically readjusting the tortoiseshell comb in her dark hair; "punctually they go to church (some of them), not attempting to guess, or not capable, I suppose, of really *knowing*, what for; but confident

that the bishop or rector or somebody will be in the pulpit and they be fed.

"And then comes a day—Now what *is* the difference," mused Selina, contemplatively narrowing her inward gaze, "what is the real difference between Farmer Tropolpen and God, and between that fussy, forward—still she was adventurous—little Leghorn, who must lay the most delicious little cream-coloured eggs, and Me? Surely no : He cannot want me (He cannot expect me to go to church and praise and pray) simply for the sake of my wretched little hard-boiled bits of goodness. Does He really only think of us twice in twenty-four hours, like the tides, like matins and evensong, as—well, as I think of Him ?

And if in between-whiles He did think of me or I of Him, isn't there any inexhaustible store of heavenly manna which my trussed-up soul—and I suppose the others—though I wouldn't mind the doves and the sea-gull or Oh dear, oh dear!"

Selina stared softly on, down the sunlit and intensely still staircase into the shadow. "Of course," began again that still small voice within in far-away tones, "it's not quite like that, it's *not* on all fours. It's a bigger dream than that. If they, silly cackling creatures, mercifully don't know what that carnivorous old egg-hunter is after, I'm pretty certain he doesn't know eventually himself. Merely keeping them alive : though that's something. But not the other. Anyhow, suppose, just suppose *not*. Suppose there's someone, a kind of unseen circumspectious spirit, kneeling crunched-up there at a little square staircase window. Oh, ever so happy and dreamy and

sorrowful and alone, and not in the least muddle-minded—omniscient, I *suppose*, though that, of course, must be omni—omni-sensitive, too—just staring down in sheer joy and *interest* at the farmer, and the sunshine, and the valley, and the yard, and the hens, and that delicious filthy duck-pond and—and the Atlantic, absolutely all *Its*, and . . . What wouldn't I. . . .?"

But at that moment, and only just in time to dis-sever the philosophical net in which poor Selina's soul was definitely strangling, a whiff of hot baked "splitters" wafted itself up the staircase, and Selina with an exclamatory "Lawks!" and a thin flying hand flung up once more to her tortoiseshell comb, remembered her tea.

SEATON'S AUNT

I HAD heard rumours of Seaton's Aunt long before I actually encountered her. Seaton, in the hush of confidence, or at any little show of toleration on our part, would remark, "My aunt," or "My old aunt, you know," as if his relative might be a kind of cement to an *entente cordiale*.

He had an unusual quantity of pocket-money ; or, at any rate, it was bestowed on him in unusually large amounts ; and he spent it freely, though none of us would have described him as an "awfully generous chap." "Hullo, Seaton," we would say, "the old Begum ?" At the beginning of term, too, he used to bring back surprising and exotic dainties in a box with a trick padlock that accompanied him from his first appearance at Gummidge's in a billy-cock hat to the rather abrupt conclusion of his schooldays.

From a boy's point of view he looked distastefully foreign, with his yellow skin, and slow chocolate-coloured eyes, and lean weak figure. Merely for his looks he was treated by most of us true-blue Englishmen with condescension, hostility, or contempt. We used to call him "Pongo," but without any much better excuse for the nickname than his skin. He was, that is, in one sense of the term what he assuredly was not in the other sense, a sport.

Seaton and I, as I may say, were never in any sense intimate at school ; our orbits only intersected in class. I kept deliberately aloof from him. I felt vaguely he was a sneak, and remained quite un-

mollified by advances on his side, which, in a boy's barbarous fashion, unless it suited me to be magnanimous, I haughtily ignored.

We were both of us quick-footed, and at Prisoner's Base used occasionally to hide together. And so I best remember Seaton—his narrow watchful face in the dusk of a summer evening ; his peculiar crouch, and his inarticulate whisperings and mumblings. Otherwise he played all games slackly and limply ; used to stand and feed at his locker with a crony or two until his "tuck" gave out ; or waste his money on some outlandish fancy or other. He bought, for instance, a silver bangle, which he wore above his left elbow, until some of the fellows showed their masterly contempt of the practice by dropping it nearly red-hot down his neck.

It needed, therefore, a rather peculiar taste, a rather rare kind of schoolboy courage and indifference to criticism, to be much associated with him. And I had neither the taste nor, perhaps, the courage. None the less, he did make advances, and on one memorable occasion went to the length of bestowing on me a whole pot of some outlandish mulberry-coloured jelly that had been duplicated in his term's supplies. In the exuberance of my gratitude I promised to spend the next half-term holiday with him at his aunt's house.

I had clean forgotten my promise when, two or three days before the holiday, he came up and triumphantly reminded me of it.

"Well, to tell you the honest truth, Seaton, old chap—" I began graciously : but he cut me short.

"My aunt expects you," he said ; "she is very glad you are coming. She's sure to be quite decent to you, Withers."

I looked at him in sheer astonishment ; the emphasis was so uncalled for. It seemed to suggest an aunt not hitherto hinted at, and a friendly feeling on Seaton's side that was far more disconcerting than welcome.

We reached his home partly by train, partly by a lift in an empty farm-cart, and partly by walking. It was a whole-day holiday, and we were to sleep the night ; he lent me extraordinary night-gear, I remember. The village street was unusually wide, and was fed from a green by two converging roads, with an inn, and a high green sign at the corner. About a hundred yards down the street was a chemist's shop—a Mr. Tanner's. We descended the two steps into his dusky and odorous interior to buy, I remember, some rat poison. A little beyond the chemist's was the forge. You then walked along a very narrow path, under a fairly high wall, nodding here and there with weeds and tufts of grass, and so came to the iron garden-gates, and saw the high flat house behind its huge sycamore. A coach-house stood on the left of the house, and on the right a gate led into a kind of rambling orchard. The lawn lay away over to the left again, and at the bottom (for the whole garden sloped gently to a sluggish and rushy pond-like stream) was a meadow.

We arrived at noon, and entered the gates out of the hot dust beneath the glitter of the dark-curtained

windows. Seaton led me at once through the little garden-gate to show me his tadpole pond, swarming with what (being myself not in the least interested in low life) I considered the most horrible creatures—of all shapes, consistencies, and sizes, but with whom Seaton seemed to be on the most intimate of terms. I can see his absorbed face now as he sat on his heels and fished the slimy things out in his sallow palms. Wearying at last of these pets, we loitered about awhile in an aimless fashion. Seaton seemed to be listening, or at any rate waiting, for something to happen or for someone to come. But nothing did happen and no one came.

That was just like Seaton. Anyhow, the first view I got of his aunt was when, at the summons of a distant gong, we turned from the garden, very hungry and thirsty, to go into luncheon. We were approaching the house when Seaton suddenly came to a standstill. Indeed, I have always had the impression that he plucked at my sleeve. Something, at least, seemed to catch me back, as it were, as he cried, "Look out, there she is!"

She was standing at an upper window which opened wide on a hinge, and at first sight she looked an excessively tall and overwhelming figure. This, however, was mainly because the window reached all but to the floor of her bedroom. She was in reality rather an under-sized woman, in spite of her long face and big head. She must have stood, I think, unusually still, with eyes fixed on us, though this impression may be due to Seaton's sudden warning and to my consciousness of the cautious and subdued

air that had fallen on him at sight of her. I know that without the least reason in the world I felt a kind of guiltiness, as if I had been "caught." There was a silvery star pattern sprinkled on her black silk dress, and even from the ground I could see the immense coils of her hair and the rings on her left hand which was held fingering the small jet buttons of her bodice. She watched our united advance without stirring, until, imperceptibly, her eyes raised and lost themselves in the distance, so that it was out of an assumed reverie that she appeared suddenly to awaken to our presence beneath her when we drew close to the house.

"So this is your friend, Mr. Smithers, I suppose?" she said, bobbing to me.

"Withers, aunt," said Seaton.

"It's much the same," she said, with eyes fixed on me. "Come in, Mr. Withers, and bring him along with you."

She continued to gaze at me—at least, I think she did so. I know that the fixity of her scrutiny and her ironical "Mr." made me feel peculiarly uncomfortable. None the less she was extremely kind and attentive to me, though, no doubt, her kindness and attention showed up more vividly against her complete neglect of Seaton. Only one remark that I have, any recollection of she made to him : "When I lo^r on my nephew, Mr. Smithers, I realise that dus^r are, and dust shall become. You are hot, dir^r incorrigible, Arthur."

She sat at the head of the table, Seaton and I, before a wide waste of damas^r

between them. It was an old and rather close dining-room, with windows thrown wide to the green garden and a wonderful cascade of fading roses. Miss Seaton's great chair faced this window, so that its rose-reflected light shone full on her yellowish face, and on just such chocolate eyes as my schoolfellow's, except that hers were more than half-covered by unusually long and heavy lids.

There she sat, steadily eating, with those sluggish eyes fixed for the most part on my face ; above them stood the deep-lined fork between her eyebrows ; and above that the wide expanse of a remarkable brow beneath its strange steep bank of hair. The lunch was copious, and consisted, I remember, of all such dishes as are generally considered too rich and too good for the schoolboy digestion—lobster mayonnaise, cold game sausages, an immense veal and ham pie farced with eggs, truffles, and numberless delicious flavours ; besides kickshaws, creams and sweetmeats. We even had wine, a half-glass of old darkish sherry each.

Miss Seaton enjoyed and indulged an enormous appetite. Her example and a natural schoolboy voracity soon overcame my nervousness of her, even to the extent of allowing me to enjoy to the best of my bent so rare a spread. Seaton was singularly modest ; the greater part of his meal consisted of bread and raisins, which he nibbled surreptitiously if he found difficulty in swallowing them.

I mean that Miss Seaton "conversed" with merely scattered trenchant remarks and twinkled a baited question over my

head. But her face was like a dense and involved accompaniment to her talk. She presently dropped the "Mr.," to my intense relief, and called me now Withers, or Wither, now Smithers, and even once towards the close of the meal distinctly Johnson, though how on earth my name suggested it, or whose face mine had reanimated in memory, I cannot conceive.

"And is Arthur a good boy at school, Mr. Wither?" was one of her many questions. "Does he please his masters? Is he first in his class? What does the reverend Dr. Gummidge think of him, eh?"

I knew she was jeering at him, but her face was adamant against the least flicker of sarcasm or facetiousness. I gazed fixedly at a blushing crescent of lobster.

"I think you're eighth, aren't you, Seaton?"

Seaton moved his small pupils towards his aunt. But she continued to gaze with a kind of concentrated detachment at me.

"Arthur will never make a brilliant scholar, I fear," she said, lifting a dexterously-burdened fork to her wide mouth. . . .

After luncheon she preceded me up to my bedroom. It was a jolly little bedroom, with a brass fender and rugs and a polished floor, on which it was possible, I afterwards found, to play "snow-shoes." Ov the washstand was a little black-framed water-c^re drawing, depicting a large eye with an ext fishlike intensity in the spark of light on pupil; and in "illuminated" lettering b printed very minutely, "Thou God

followed by a long looped monogram, "S.S.," in the corner. The other pictures were all of the sea : brigs on blue water ; a schooner overtopping chalk cliffs ; a rocky island of prodigious steepness, with two tiny sailors dragging a monstrous boat up a shelf of beach.

"This is the room, Withers, my brother William died in when a boy. Admire the view!"

I looked out of the window across the tree-tops. It was a day hot with sunshine over the green fields, and the cattle were standing swishing their tails in the shallow water. But the view at the moment was only exaggeratedly vivid because I was horribly dreading that she would presently enquire after my luggage, and I had not brought even a toothbrush. I need have had no fear. Hers was not that highly-civilised type of mind that is stuffed with sharp, material details. Nor could her ample presence be described as in the least motherly.

"I would never consent to question a school-fellow behind my nephew's back," she said, standing in the middle of the room, "but tell me, Smithers, is Arthur so unpopular? You, I understand, his only close friend." She stood in a dazzle of and out of it her eyes regarded me with such penetration beneath their thick lids that I doubt if my face concealed the least thought from

"But there, there," she added very suavely, 'g her head a little, "don't trouble to answer ever extort an answer. Boys are queer fish."

It perhaps have suggested his washing fore luncheon ; but—not my choice,

Smithers. God forbid! And now, perhaps, you would like to go into the garden again. I cannot actually see from here, but I should not be surprised if Arthur is now skulking behind that hedge."

He was. I saw his head come out and take a rapid glance at the windows.

"Join him, Mr. Smithers; we shall meet again, I hope, at the tea-table. The afternoon I spend in retirement."

Whether or not, Seaton and I had not been long engaged with the aid of two green switches in riding round and round a lumbering old gray horse we found in the meadow, before a rather bunched-up figure appeared, walking along the field-path on the other side of the water, with a magenta parasol studiously lowered in our direction throughout her slow progress, as if that were the magnetic needle and we the fixed Pole. Seaton at once lost all nerve in his riding. At the next lurch of the old mare's heels he toppled over into the grass, and I slid off the sleek broad back to join him where he stood, rubbing his shoulder and sourly watching the rather pompous figure till it was out of sight.

"Was that your aunt, Seaton?" I enquired; but not till then.

He nodded.

"Why didn't she take any notice of us, then?"

"She never does."

"Why not?"

"Oh, she knows all right, without; that awful part of it." Seaton was about the o' Gummidge's who ever had the oster

bad language. He had suffered for it too. But it wasn't, I think, bravado. I believe he really felt certain things more intensely than most of the other fellows, and they were generally things that fortunate and average people do not feel at all—the peculiar quality, for instance, of the British schoolboy's imagination.

"I tell you, Withers," he went on moodily, slinking across the meadow with his hands covered up in his pockets, "she sees everything. And what she doesn't see she knows without."

"But how?" I said, not because I was much interested, but because the afternoon was so hot and tiresome and purposeless, and it seemed more of a bore to remain silent. Seaton turned gloomily and spoke in a very low voice.

"Don't appear to be talking of her, if you wouldn't mind. It's—because she's in league with the devil." He nodded his head and stooped to pick up a round flat pebble. "I tell you," he said, still stooping, "you fellows don't realise what it is. I know I'm a bit close and all that. But so would you be if you had that old hag listening to every thought you think."

I looked at him, then turned and surveyed one by one the windows of the house.

"Where's your *pater*?" I said awkwardly.

"Dead, ages and ages ago, and my mother too.
Not my aunt by rights."

"Is she, then?"

"She's not my mother's sister, because my
married twice; and she's one of the

first lot. I don't know what you call her, but anyhow she's not my real aunt."

"She gives you plenty of pocket-money."

Seaton looked steadfastly at me out of his flat eyes. "She can't give me what's mine. When I come of age half of the whole lot will be mine ; and what's more"—he turned his back on the house—"I'll make her hand over every blessed shilling of it."

I put my hands in my pockets and stared at Seaton ; "Is it much?"

He nodded.

"Who told you ?" He got suddenly very angry ; a darkish red came into his cheeks, his eyes glistened, but he made no answer, and we loitered listlessly about the garden until it was time for tea. . . .

Seaton's aunt was wearing an extraordinary kind of lace jacket when we sidled sheepishly into the drawing-room together. She greeted me with a heavy and protracted smile, and bade me bring a chair close to the little table.

"I hope Arthur has made you feel at home," she said as she handed me my cup in her crooked hand. "He don't talk much to me ; but then I'm an old woman. You must come again, Wither, and draw him out of his shell. You old snail !" She wagged her head at Seaton, who sat munching cake and watching her intently.

"And we must correspond, perhaps." She shut her eyes at me. "You must write and everything behind the creature's back." I found her rather disquieting company. T drew on. Lamps were brought in by

nondescript face and very quiet footsteps. Seaton was told to bring out the chess-men. And we played a game, she and I, with her big chin thrust over the board at every move as she gloated over the pieces and occasionally croaked "Check!"—after which she would sit back inscrutably staring at me. But the game was never finished. She simply hemmed me defencelessly in with a cloud of men that held me impotent, and yet one and all refused to administer to my poor flustered old king a merciful *coup de grâce*.

"There," she said, as the clock struck ten—"a drawn game, Withers. We are very evenly matched. A very creditable defence, Withers. You know your room. There's supper on a tray in the dining-room. Don't let the creature over-eat himself. The gong will sound three-quarters of an hour *before* a punctual breakfast." She held out her cheek to Seaton, and he kissed it with obvious perfunctoriness. With me she shook hands.

"An excellent game," she said cordially, "but my memory is poor, and"—she swept the pieces helter-skelter into the box—"the result will never be known." She raised her great head far back. "Eh?"

It was a kind of challenge, and I could only murmur: "Oh, I was absolutely in a hole, you *know!*" when she burst out laughing and waved us "out of the room."

Seaton and I stood and ate our supper, with one pick to light us, in a corner of the dining-room. "And how would you like it?" he said very cautiously poking his head round the

"Like what?"

"Being spied on—every blessed thing you do and think?"

"I shouldn't like it at all," I said, "if she does."

"And yet you let her smash you up at chess!"

"I didn't let her!" I said, indignantly.

"Well, you funk'd it, then."

"And I didn't funk it either," I said; "she's so jolly clever with her knights." Seaton stared fixedly at the candle. "You wait, that's all," he said slowly. And we went upstairs to bed.

I had not been long in bed, I think, when I was cautiously awakened by a touch on my shoulder. And there was Seaton's face in the candlelight—and his eyes looking into mine.

"What's up?" I said, rising quickly to my elbow.

"Don't scurry," he whispered, "or she'll hear. I'm sorry for waking you, but I didn't think you'd be asleep so soon."

"Why, what's the time, then?" Seaton wore, what was then rather unusual, a night-suit, and he hauled his big silver watch out of the pocket in his jacket.

"It's a quarter to twelve. I never get to sleep before twelve—not here."

"What do you do, then?"

"Oh, I read and listen."

"Listen?"

Seaton stared into his candle-flame as if he were listening even then. "You can't guess what it is. All you read in ghost stories, that's all rot. You can't see much, Withers, but you know all the same."

"Know what?"

"Why, that they're there."

"Who's there?" I asked fretfully, glancing at the door.

"Why in the house. It swarms with 'em. Just you stand still and listen outside my bedroom door in the middle of the night. I have, dozens of times; they're all over the place."

"Look here, Seaton," I said, "you asked me to come here, and I didn't mind chucking up a leave just to oblige you and because I'd promised; but don't get talking a lot of rot, that's all, or you'll know the difference when we get back."

"Don't fret," he said coldly, turning away. "I shan't be at school long. And what's more, you're here now, and there isn't anybody else to talk to. I'll chance the other."

"Look here, Seaton," I said, "you may think you're going to scare me with a lot of stuff about voices and all that. But I'll just thank you to clear out; and you may please yourself about pottering about all night."

He made no answer; he was standing by the dressing-table looking across his candle into the looking-glass; he turned and stared slowly round the walls.

"Even this room's nothing more than a coffin. I suppose she told you—'It's all exactly the same as when my brother William died'—trust her for that! And good luck to him, say I. Look at that." He raised his candle close to the little water-colour I have mentioned. "There's hundreds of eyes like

that in this house ; and even if God does see you, He takes precious good care you don't see Him. And it's just the same with them. I tell you what, Withers, I'm getting sick of all this. I shan't stand it much longer."

The house was silent within and without, and even in the yellowish radiance of the candle a faint silver showed through the open window on my blind. I slipped off the bedclothes, wide awake, and sat irresolute on the bedside.

"I know you're only guying me," I said angrily, "but why is the house full of—what you say ? Why do you hear—what you *do* hear ? Tell me that, you silly fool !"

Seaton sat down on a chair and rested his candlestick on his knee. He blinked at me calmly. "She brings them," he said, with lifted eyebrows.

"Who ? Your aunt ?"

He nodded.

"How ?"

"I told you," he answered pettishly. "She's in league. You don't know. She as good as killed my mother ; I know that. But it's not only her by a long chalk. She just sucks you dry. I know. And that's what she'll do for me ; because I'm like her—like my mother, I mean. She simply hates to see me alive. I wouldn't be like that old she-wolf for a million pounds. And so"—he broke off, with a comprehensive wave of his candlestick—"they're always here. Ah, my boy, wait till she's dead ! She'll hear something then, I can tell you. It's all very well now, but wait till then ! I wouldn't be in

her shoes when she has to clear out—for something. Don't you go and believe I care for ghosts, or whatever you like to call them. We're all in the same box. We're all under her thumb."

He was looking almost nonchalantly at the ceiling at the moment, when I saw his face change, saw his eyes suddenly drop like shot birds and fix themselves on the cranny of the door he had just left ajar. Even from where I sat I could see his colour change; he went greenish. He crouched without stirring, simply fixed. And I, scarcely daring to breathe, sat with creeping skin, simply watching him. His hands relaxed, and he gave a kind of sigh.

"Was that one?" I whispered, with a timid show of jauntiness. He looked round, opened his mouth, and nodded. "What?" I said. He jerked his thumb with meaningful eyes, and I knew that he meant that his aunt had been there listening at our door cranny.

"Look here, Seaton," I said once more, wriggling to my feet. "You may think I'm a jolly noodle; just as you please. But your aunt has been civil to me and all that, and I don't believe a word you say about her, that's all, and never did. Every fellow's a bit off his pluck at night, and you may think it a fine sport to try your rubbish on me. I heard your aunt come upstairs before I fell asleep. And I'll bet you a level tanner she's in bed now. What's more, you can keep your blessed ghosts to yourself. It's a guilty conscience, I should think."

Seaton looked at me curiously, without answering for a moment. "I'm not a liar, Withers; but I'm not

going to quarrel either. You're the only chap I care a button for ; or, at any rate, you're the only chap that's ever come here ; and it's something to tell a fellow what you feel. I don't care a fig for fifty thousand ghosts, although I swear on my solemn oath that I know they're here. But she"—he turned deliberately—"you laid a tanner she's in bed, Withers ; well, I know different. She's never in bed much of the night, and I'll prove it, too, just to show you I'm not such a nolly as you think I am. Come on!"

"Come on where?"

"Why, to see."

I hesitated. He opened a large cupboard and took out a small dark dressing-gown and a kind of shaggy jacket. He threw the jacket on the bed and put on the gown. His dusky face was colourless, and I could see by the way he shivered at the touch that he was shivering. But it was no good shoving the white feather down. So I drew the tassel of the hood over my shoulders and, leaving our candle largely burning on the chair, we went out together and stood in the corridor.

"Now then, Asien!" Seaton whispered.

We stood leaning over the staircase. It was like leaning over a well, so still and cold the air was all around us. But presently, as I expect, happened in most old houses, began to echo and reverberate in our ears a medley of infinite small stirrings and whisperings. No sound of the disturbance in old timber would relax its fibres or a scurvy die away behind the perishing walls of it. But amidst and between such

sounds as these I seemed to begin to be conscious, as it were, of the lightest of footfalls, sounds as faint as the vanishing remembrance of voices in a dream. Seaton was all in obscurity except his face; out of that his eyes gleamed darkly, watching me.

"You'd hear, too, in time, my fine soldier," he muttered. "Come on!"

He descended the stairs, slipping his lean fingers lightly along the balusters. He turned to the right at the loop, and I followed him barefooted along a thickly-carpeted corridor. At the end stood a door ~~slipper~~. And from here we very stealthily and in complete darkness ascended five narrow stairs. Seaton, with impious caution, slowly pushed open a door, and we stood impudent looking into a great pool of darkness, out of which, lit by the feeble clearness of a night-light, rose a last bed. A heap of clothes lay on the floor; beside them two slippers dozed, with those feet to each, two yards apart. Somewhere a little clock ticked huskily. There was a rather close smell of lavender and *essence de colonie*, mingled with the perfume of ancient sachets, soap, and drugs. But there was a scent even more peculiarly commingled

"And the bed?" I stared warily. "It was mounded up magically, and it was empty."

Seaton turned a vague pale face all shadows: "What did I say?" he muttered. "Who's—who's dead now, I say? How are we going to get back to the meeting net, I say?" Answer me that! Oh, dash to goodness, you hadn't come here, Withers."

Withers stood there shivering in his skimpy gown,

and could hardly speak for his teeth chattering. And very distinctly, in the hush that followed his whisper, I heard approaching a faint unhurried voluminous rustle. Seaton clutched my arm, dragged me to the right across the room to a large cupboard, and drew the door close to on us. And, presently, as with bursting lungs I peeped out into the long, low, curtained bedroom, waddled in that wonderful great head and body. I can see her now, all patched and lined with shadow, her tied-up hair (she must have had enormous quantities of it for so old a woman), her heavy lids above those flat, slow, vigilant eyes. She just passed across my ken in the vague dusk ; but the bed was out of sight.

We waited on and on, listening to the clock's muffled ticking. Not the ghost of a sound rose up from the great bed. Either she lay archly listening or slept a sleep serener than an infant's. And when, it seemed, we had been hours in hiding and were cramped, chilled, and half suffocated, we crept out on all fours, with terror knocking at our ribs, and so down the five narrow stairs and back to the little candle-lit blue-and-gold bedroom.

Once there, Seaton gave in. He sat livid on a chair with closed eyes.

"Here," I said, shaking his arm, "I'm going to bed ; I've had enough of this foolery ; I'm going to bed." His lips quivered, but he made no answer. I poured out some water into my basin and, with that cold pictured azure eye fixed on us, bespattered Seaton's sallow face and forehead and dabbed his hair. He presently sighed and opened fish-like eyes.

"Come on!" I said. "Don't get shamming, there's a good chap. Get on my back, if you like, and I'll carry you into your bedroom."

He waved me away and stood up. So, with my candle in one hand, I took him under the arm and walked him along according to his direction down the corridor. His was a much dingier room than mine, and littered with boxes, paper, cages, and clothes. I huddled him into bed and turned to go. And suddenly, I can hardly explain it now, a kind of cold and deadly terror swept over me. I almost ran out of the room, with eyes fixed rigidly in front of me, blew out my candle, and buried my head under the bedclothes.

When I awoke, roused not by a gong, but by a long-continued tapping at my door, sunlight was raying in on cornice and bedpost, and birds were singing in the garden. I got up, ashamed of the night's folly, dressed quickly, and went downstairs. The breakfast room was sweet with flowers and fruit and honey. Seaton's aunt was standing in the garden beside the open French window, feeding a great flutter of birds. I watched her for a moment, unseen. Her face was set in a deep reverie beneath the shadow of a big loose sun-hat. It was deeply lined, crooked, and, in a way I can't describe, fixedly vacant and strange, I coughed, and she turned at once with a prodigious smile to enquire how I had slept. And in that mysterious way by which we learn each other's secret thoughts without a sentence spoken I knew that she had followed every word and movement of the night before, and was triumphing over my affected

innocence and ridiculing my friendly and too easy advances.

We returned to school, Seaton and I, lavishly laden, and by rail all the way. I made no reference to the obscure talk we had had, and resolutely refused to meet his eyes or to take up the hints he let fall. I was relieved—and yet I was sorry—to be going back, and strode on as fast as I could from the station, with Seaton almost trotting at my heels. But he insisted on buying more fruit and sweets—my share of which I accepted with a very bad grace. It was uncomfortably like a bribe ; and, after all, I had no quarrel with his rum old aunt, and hadn't really believed half the stuff he had told me.

I saw as little of him as I could after that. He never referred to our visit or resumed his confidences, though in class I would sometimes catch his eye fixed on mine, full of a mute understanding, which I easily affected not to understand. He left Gummidge's, as I have said, rather abruptly, though I never heard of anything to his discredit. And I did not see him or have any news of him again till by chance we met one summer afternoon in the Strand.

He was dressed rather oddly in a coat too large for him and a bright silky tie. But we instantly recognised one another under the awning of a cheap jeweller's shop. He immediately attached himself to me and dragged me off, not too cheerfully, to lunch with him at an Italian restaurant near by. He chattered about our old school, which he remembered only with dislike and disgust ; told me cold-bloodedly

of the disastrous fate of one or two of the old fellows who had been among his chief tormentors ; insisted on an expensive wine and the whole gamut of the foreign menu ; and finally informed me, with a good deal of niggling, that he had come up to town to buy an engagement-ring.

And of course : "How is your aunt ?" I enquired at last.

He seemed to have been awaiting the question. It fell like a stone into a deep pool, so many expressions flitted across his long un-English face.

"She's aged a good deal," he said softly, and broke off.

"She's been very decent," he continued presently after, and paused again. "In a way." He eyed me fleetingly. "I dare say you heard that—she—that is, that we—had lost a good deal of money."

"No," I said.

"Oh, yes !" said Seaton, and paused again.

And somehow, poor fellow, I knew in the clink and clatter of glass and voices that he had lied to me ; that he did not possess, and never had possessed, a penny beyond what his aunt had squandered on his too ample allowance of pocket-money.

"And the ghosts ?" I enquired quizzically.

He grew instantly solemn, and, though it may have been my fancy, slightly yellowed. But "You are making game of me, Withers," was all he said.

He asked for my address, and I rather reluctantly gave him my card.

"Look here, Withers," he said, as we stood together in the sunlight on the kerb, saying good-bye, "here I

am, and—and it's all very well. I'm not perhaps as fanciful as I was. But you are practically the only friend I have on earth—except Alice. . . . And there—to make a clean breast of it, I'm not sure that my aunt cares much about my getting married. She doesn't say so, of course. You know her well enough for that." He looked sidelong at the rattling gaudy traffic.

"What I was going to say is this: Would you mind coming down? You needn't stay the night unless you please, though, of course, you know you would be awfully welcome. But I should like you to meet my—to meet Alice; and then, perhaps, you might tell me your honest opinion of—of the other too."

I vaguely demurred. He pressed me. And we parted with a half promise that I would come. He waved his ball-topped cane at me and ran off in his long jacket after a 'bus.

A letter arrived soon after, in his small weak handwriting, giving me full particulars regarding route and trains. And without the least curiosity, even, perhaps with some little annoyance that chance should have thrown us together again, I accepted his invitation and arrived one hazy midday at his out-of-the-way station to find him sitting on a low seat under a clump of double hollyhocks, awaiting me.

His face looked absent and singularly listless; but he seemed, none the less, pleased to see me.

We walked up the village street, past the little dingy apothecary's and the empty forge, and, as on my first visit, skirted the house together, and, instead

of entering by the front door, made our way down the green path into the garden at the back. A pale haze of cloud muffled the sun ; the garden lay in a grey shimmer—its old trees, its snap-dragoned faintly glittering walls. But now there was an air of slovenliness where before all had been neat and methodical. In a patch of shallowly-dug soil stood a worn-down spade leaning against a tree. There was an old broken wheelbarrow. The roses had run to leaf and briar ; the fruit-trees were unpruned. The goddess of neglect brooded in secret.

"You ain't much of a gardener, Seaton," I said, with a sigh of ease.

"I think, do you know, I like it best like this," said Seaton. "We haven't any man now, of course. Can't afford it." He stood staring at his little dark square of freshly-turned earth. "And it always seems to me," he went on ruminatingly, "that, after all, we are nothing better than interlopers on the earth, disfiguring and staining wherever we go. I know its shocking blasphemy to say so, but then it's different here, you see. We are further away."

"To tell you the truth, Seaton, I *don't* quite see," I said ; "but it isn't a new philosophy, is it ? Anyhow, it's a precious beastly one."

"It's only what I think," he replied, with all his odd old stubborn meekness.

We wandered on together, talking little, and still with that expression of uneasy vigilance on Seaton's face. He pulled out his watch as we stood gazing idly over the green meadows and the dark motionless bulrushes.

"I think, perhaps, it's nearly time for lunch," he said. "Would you like to come in?"

We turned and walked slowly towards the house, across whose windows I confess my own eyes, too, went restlessly wandering in search of its rather disconcerting inmate. There was a pathetic look of draggledness, of want of means and care, rust and overgrowth and faded paint. Seaton's aunt, a little to my relief, did not share our meal. Seaton carved the cold meat, and dispatched a heaped-up plate by an elderly servant for his aunt's private consumption. We talked little and in half-suppressed tones, and sipped a bottle of Madeira which Seaton had rather heedfully fetched out of the great mahogany side-board.

I played him a dull and effortless game of chess, yawning between the moves he himself made almost at haphazard, and with attention elsewhere engaged. About five o'clock came the sound of a distant ring, and Seaton jumped up, overturning the board, and so ending a game that else might have fatuously continued to this day. He effusively excused himself, and after some little while returned with a slim, dark, rather sallow girl of about nineteen, in a white gown and hat, to whom I was presented with some little nervousness as his "dear old friend and schoolfellow."

We talked on in the pale afternoon light, still, as it seemed to me, and even in spite of a real effort to be clear and gay, in a half-suppressed, lack-lustre fashion. We all seemed, if it were not my fancy, to be expectant, to be rather anxiously awaiting an arrival, the appearance of someone who all but filled our collective

consciousness. Seaton talked least of all, and in a restless interjectory way, as he continually fidgeted from chair to chair. At last he proposed a stroll in the garden before the sun should have quite gone down.

Alice walked between us. Her hair and eyes were conspicuously dark against the whiteness of her gown. She carried herself not ungracefully, and yet without the least movement of her arms and body, and answered us both without turning her head. There was a curious provocative reserve in that impassive and rather long face, a half-unconscious strength of character.

And yet somehow I knew—I believe we all knew—that this walk, this discussion of their future plans was a futility. I had nothing to base such a cynicism on, except only a vague sense of oppression, the foreboding remembrance of the inert invincible power in the background, to whom optimistic plans and love-making and youth are as chaff and thistle-down. We came back, silent, in the last light. Seaton's aunt was there—under an old brass lamp. Her hair was as barbarously massed and curled as ever. Her eyelids, I think, hung even a little heavier in age over their slow-moving inscrutable pupils. We filed in softly out of the evening, and I made my bow.

"In this short interval, Mr. Withers," she remarked amiably, "you have put off youth, put on the man. Dear me, how sad it is to see the young days vanishing! Sit down. My nephew tells me you met by chance—or act of Providence, shall we call it?—and in my beloved Strand! You, I understand, are to be best

man—yes, best man, or am I divulging secrets?" She surveyed Arthur and Alice with overwhelming graciousness. They sat apart on two low chairs and smiled in return.

"And Arthur—how do you think Arthur is looking?"

"I think he looks very much in need of a change," I said deliberately.

"A change! Indeed?" She all but shut her eyes at me and with an exaggerated sentimentality shook her head. "My dear Mr. Withers! Are we not *all* in need of a change in this fleeting, fleeting world?" She mused over the remark like a connoisseur. "And you," she continued, turning abruptly to Alice, "I hope you pointed out to Mr. Withers all my pretty bits?"

"We walked round the garden," said Alice, looking out of the window. "It's a very beautiful evening."

"Is it?" said the old lady, starting up violently. "Then on this very beautiful evening we will go in to supper. Mr. Withers, your arm; Arthur, bring your bride."

I can scarcely describe with what curious ruminations I led the way into the faded, heavy-aired dining-room, with this indefinable old creature leaning weightily on my arm—the large flat bracelet on the yellow-laced wrist. She fumed a little, breathed rather heavily, as if with an effort of mind rather than of body; for she had grown much stouter and yet little more proportionate. And to talk into that great white face, so close to mine, was a queer experi-

ence in the dim light of the corridor, and even in the twinkling crystal of the candles. She was naïve—appallingly naïve; she was sudden and superficial; she was even arch; and all these in the brief, rather puffy passage from one room to the other, with these two tongue-tied children bringing up the rear. The meal was tremendous. I have never seen such a monstrous salad. But the dishes were greasy and over-spiced, and were indifferently cooked. One thing only was quite unchanged—my hostess's appetite was as Gargantuan as ever. The old solid candelabra that lighted us stood before her high-backed chair. Seaton sat a little removed, with his plate almost in darkness.

And throughout this prodigious meal his aunt talked, mainly to me, mainly at Seaton, with an occasional satirical courtesy to Alice and muttered explosions of directions to the servant. She had aged, and yet, if it be not nonsense to say so, seemed no older. I suppose to the Pyramids a decade is but as the rustling down of a handful of dust. And she reminded me of some such unshakable prehistoricism. She certainly was an amazing talker—racy, extravagant, with a delivery that was perfectly overwhelming. As for Seaton—her flashes of silence were for him. On her enormous volubility would suddenly fall a hush: acid sarcasm would be left implied; and she would sit softly moving her great head, with eyes fixed full in a dreamy smile; but with her whole attention, one could see, slowly, joyously absorbing his mute discomfiture.

She confided in us her views on a theme vaguely

occupying at the moment, I suppose, all our minds. "We have barbarous institutions, and so must put up, I suppose, with a never-ending procession of fools—of fools *ad infinitum*. Marriage, Mr. Withers, was instituted in the privacy of a garden ; *sub rosa*, as it were. Civilization flaunts it in the glare of day. The dull marry the poor ; the rich the effete ; and so our New Jerusalem is peopled with naturals, plain and coloured, at either end. I detest folly ; I detest still more (if I must be frank, dear Arthur) mere cleverness. Mankind has simply become a tailless host of uninstinctive animals. We should never have taken to Evolution, Mr. Withers. 'Natural Selection'!—little gods and fishes!—the deaf for the dumb. We should have used our brains—intellectual pride, the ecclesiastics call it. And by brains I mean—what do I mean, Alice?—I mean, my dear child," and she laid two gross fingers on Alice's narrow sleeve, "I mean courage, Consider it, Arthur. I read that the scientific world is once more beginning to be afraid of spiritual agencies. Spiritual agencies that tap, and actually float, bless their hearts! I think just one more of those mulberries—thank you.

"They talk about 'blind Love,'" she ran inconsequently on as she helped herself, with eyes roving on the dish, "but why blind? I think, do you know, from weeping over its rickets. After all, it is we plain women that triumph, Mr. Withers, beyond the mockery of time. Alice, now! Fleeting, fleeting is youth, my child. What's that you were confiding to your plate, Arthur? Satirical boy. He laughs at his old aunt : nay, but thou didst laugh. He detests

all sentiment. He whispers the most acid asides. Come, my love, we will leave these cynics ; we will go and commiserate with each other on our sex. The choice of two evils, Mr. Smithers !” I opened the door, and she swept out as if borne on a torrent of unintelligible indignation ; and Arthur and I were left in the clear four-flamed light alone.

For a while we sat in silence. He shook his head at my cigarette-case, and I lit a cigarette. Presently he fidgeted in his chair and poked his head forward into the light. He paused to rise and shut again the shut door.

“How long will you be ?” he said, standing by the table.

I laughed.

“Oh, it’s not that !” he said, in some confusion. “Of course, I like to be with her. But it’s not that. The truth is, Withers, I don’t care about leaving her too long with my aunt.”

I hesitated. He looked at me questioningly.

“Look here, Seaton,” I said, “you know well enough that I don’t want to interfere in your affairs, or to offer advice where it is not wanted. But don’t you think perhaps you may not treat your aunt quite in the right way ? As one gets old, you know, a little give and take. I have an old godmother, or something. She talks, too. . . . A little allowance : it does no harm. But hang it all, I’m no talker.”

He sat down with his hands in his pockets and still with his eyes fixed almost incredulously on mine. “How ?” he said.

“Well, my dear fellow, if I’m any judge—mind, I

don't say that I am—but I can't help thinking she thinks you don't care for her ; and perhaps takes your silence for—for bad temper. She has been very decent to you, hasn't she?"

"Decent'? My God!" said Seaton.

I smoked on in silence ; but he continued to look at me with that peculiar concentration I remembered of old.

"I don't think, perhaps, Withers," he began presently, "I don't think you quite understand. Perhaps you are not quite our kind. You always did, just like the other fellows, guy me at school. You laughed at me that night you came to stay here—about the voices and all that. But I don't mind being laughed at—because I know."

"Know what?" It was the same old system of dull question and evasive answer.

"I mean I know that what we see and hear is only the smallest fraction of what is. I know she lives quite out of this. She *talks* to you ; but it's all make-believe. It's all a 'parlour game.' She's not really with you ; only pitting her outside wits against yours and enjoying the fooling. She's living on inside, on what you're rotten without. That's what it is—a cannibal feast. She's a spider. It doesn't much matter what you call it. It means the same kind of thing. I tell you, Withers, she hates me ; and you can scarcely dream what that hatred means. I used to think I had an inkling of the reason. It's oceans deeper than that. It just lies behind : herself against myself. Why, after all, how much do we really understand of anything? We don't even know our

own histories, and not a tenth, not a tenth of the reasons. What has life been to me?—nothing but a trap. And when one is set free, it only begins again. I thought you might understand; but you are on a different level: that's all."

"What on earth are you talking about?" I said contemptuously, in spite of myself.

"I mean what I say," he said gutturally. "All this outside's only make-believe—but there! what's the good of talking? So far as this is concerned I'm as good as done. You wait."

Seaton blew out three of the candles and, leaving the vacant room in semi-darkness, we groped our way along the corridor to the drawing-room. There a full moon stood shining in at the long garden windows. Alice sat stooping at the door, with her hands clasped, looking out, alone.

"Where is she?" Seaton asked in a low tone.

Alice looked up; their eyes met in a kind of instantaneous understanding, and the door immediately afterwards opened behind us.

"*Such a moon!*" said a voice that, once heard, remained unforgettably on the ear. "A night for lovers, Mr. Withers, if ever there was one. Get a shawl, my dear Arthur, and take Alice for a little promenade. I dare say we old cronies will manage to keep awake. Hasten, hasten, Romeo! My poor, poor Alice, how laggard a lover!"

Seaton returned with a shawl. They drifted out into the moonlight. My companion gazed after them till they were out of hearing, turned to me gravely, and suddenly twisted her white face into such

a convulsion of contemptuous amusement that I could only stare blankly in reply.

"Dear innocent children!" she said, with inimitable unctuousness. "Well, well, Mr. Withers, we poor seasoned old creatures must move with the times. Do you sing?"

I scouted the idea.

"Then you must listen to my playing. Chess"—she clasped her forehead with both cramped hands—"chess is now completely beyond my poor wits."

She sat down at the piano and ran her fingers in a flourish over the keys. "What shall it be? How shall we capture them, those passionate hearts? That first fine careless rapture? Poetry itself." She gazed softly into the garden a moment, and presently, with a shake of her body, began to play the opening bars of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata. The piano was old and woolly. She played without music. The lamplight was rather dim. The moon-beams from the window lay across the keys. Her head was in shadow. And whether it was simply due to her personality or to some really occult skill in her playing I cannot say: I only know that she gravely and deliberately set herself to satirise the beautiful music. It brooded on the air, disillusioned, charged with mockery and bitterness. I stood at the window; far down the path I could see the white figure glimmering in that pool of colourless light. A few faint stars shone, and still that amazing woman behind me dragged out of the unwilling keys her wonderful grotesquerie of youth and love and beauty. It came to an end. I knew the player was watching me.

"Please, please, go on!" I murmured, without turning. "Please go on playing, Miss Seaton."

No answer was returned to my rather fluttering sarcasm, but I knew in some indefinite way that I was being acutely scrutinised, when suddenly there followed a procession of quiet, plaintive chords which broke at last softly into the hymn, *A Few More Years Shall Roll.*

I confess it held me spellbound. There is a wistful, strained, plangent pathos in the tune; but beneath those masterly old hands it cried softly and bitterly the solitude and desperate estrangement of the world. Arthur and his lady-love vanished from my thoughts. No one could put into a rather hackneyed old hymn-tune such an appeal who had never known the meaning of the words. Their meaning, anyhow, isn't commonplace.

I turned very cautiously and glanced at the musician. She was leaning forward a little over the keys, so that at the approach of my cautious glance she had but to turn her face into the thin flood of moonlight for every feature to become distinctly visible. And so, with the tune abruptly terminated, we steadfastly regarded one another, and she broke into a chuckle of laughter.

"Not quite so seasoned as I supposed, Mr. Withers. I see you are a real lover of music. To me it is too painful. It eyokes too much thought. . . ."

I could scarcely see her little glittering eyes under their penthouse lids.

"And now," she broke off crisply, "tell me, as a man of the world, what do you think of my new niece?"

I was not a man of the world, nor was I much flattered in my stiff and dullish way of looking at things by being called one ; and I could answer her without the least hesitation.

"I don't think, Miss Seaton, I'm much of a judge of character. She's very charming."

"A brunette?"

"I think I prefer dark women."

"And why? Consider, Mr. Withers ; dark hair, dark eyes, dark cloud, dark night, dark vision, dark death, dark grave, dark DARK!"

Perhaps the climax would have rather thrilled Seaton, but I was too thick-skinned. "I don't know much about all that," I answered rather pompously. "Broad daylight's difficult enough for most of us."

"Ah," she said, with a sly inward burst of satirical laughter.

"And I suppose," I went on, perhaps a little nettled, "it isn't the actual darkness one admires, it's the contrast of the skin, and the colour of the eyes, and—and their shining. Just as," I went blundering on, too late to turn back, "just as you only see the stars in the dark. It would be a long day without any evening. As for death and the grave, I don't suppose we shall much notice that." Arthur and his sweetheart were slowly returning along the dewy path. "I believe in making the best of things."

"How very interesting!" came the smooth answer. "I see you are a philosopher, Mr. Withers. H'm! 'As for death and the grave, I don't suppose we shall much notice that.' Very interesting. . . . And I'm sure," she added in a particularly suave voice, "I

profoundly hope so." She rose slowly from her stool. "You will take pity on me again, I hope. You and I would get on famously—kindred spirits—elective affinities. And, of course, now that my nephew's going to leave me, now that his affections are centred on another, I shall be a very lonely old woman. . . . Shall I not, Arthur?"

Seaton blinked stupidly. "I didn't hear what you said, Aunt."

"I was telling our old friend, Arthur, that when you are gone I shall be a very lonely old woman."

"Oh, I don't think so ;" he said in a strange voice.

"He means, Mr. Withers, he means, my dear child," she said, sweeping her eyes over Alice, "he means that I shall have memory for company—heavenly memory—the ghosts of other days. Sentimental boy ! And did you enjoy our music, Alice ? Did I really stir that youthful heart?. . . O, O, O," continued the horrible old creature, "you billers and cooers, I have been listening to such flatteries, such confessions ! Beware, beware, Arthur, there's many a slip." She rolled her little eyes at me, she shrugged her shoulders at Alice, and gazed an instant stonily into her nephew's face.

I held out my hand. "Good night, good night!" she cried. "He that fights and runs away. Ah, good night, Mr. Withers ; come again soon !" She thrust out her cheek at Alice, and we all three filed slowly out of the room.

Black shadow darkened the porch and half the spreading sycamore. We walked without speaking up the dusty village street. Here and there a crimson

window glowed. At the fork of the high-road I said good-bye. But I had taken hardly more than a dozen paces when a sudden impulse seized me.

"Seaton!" I called.

He turned in the moonlight.

"You have my address; if by any chance, you know, you should care to spend a week or two in town between this and the—the Day, we should be delighted to see you."

"Thank you, Withers, thank you," he said in a low voice.

"I dare say"—I waved my stick gallantly to Alice—"I dare say you will be doing some shopping; we could all meet," I added, laughing.

"Thank you, thank you, Withers—immensely," he repeated.

And so we parted.

But they were out of the jog-trot of my prosaic life. And being of a stolid and incurious nature, I left Seaton and his marriage, and even his aunt, to themselves in my memory, and scarcely gave a thought to them until one day I was walking up the Strand again, and passed the flashing gloaming of the covered-in jeweller's shop where I had accidentally encountered my old schoolfellow in the summer. It was one of those still close autumnal days after a rainy night. I cannot say why, but a vivid recollection returned to my mind of our meeting and of how suppressed Seaton had seemed, and of how vainly he had endeavoured to appear assured and eager. He must be married by now, and had doubtless returned from his

honeymoon. And I had clean forgotten my manners, had sent not a word of congratulation, nor—as I might very well have done, and as I knew he would have been immensely pleased at my doing—the ghost of a wedding-present.

On the other hand, I pleaded with myself, I had had no invitation. I paused at the corner of Trafalgar Square, and at the bidding of one of those caprices that seize occasionally on even an unimaginative mind, I suddenly ran after a green 'bus that was passing, and found myself bound on a visit I had not in the least foreseen.

The colours of autumn were over the village when I arrived. A beautiful late afternoon sunlight bathed thatch and meadow. But it was close and hot. A child, two dogs, a very old woman with a heavy basket I encountered. One or two incurious tradesmen looked idly up as I passed by. It was all so rural and so still, my whimsical impulse had so much flagged, that for a while I hesitated to venture under the shadow of the sycamore-tree to enquire after the happy pair. I deliberately passed by the faint-blue gates and continued my walk under the high green and tufted wall. Hollyhocks had attained their topmost bud and seeded in the little cottage gardens beyond; the Michaelmas daisies were in flower; a sweet warm aromatic smell of fading leaves was in the air. Beyond the cottages lay a field where cattle were grazing, and beyond that I came to a little churchyard. Then the road wound on, pathless and houseless, among gorse and bracken. I turned impatiently and walked quickly back to the house and rang the bell.

The rather colourless elderly woman who answered my enquiry informed me that Miss Seaton was at home, as if only taciturnity forbade her adding, "But she doesn't want to see *you*."

"Might I, do you think, have Mr. Arthur's address?" I said.

She looked at me with quiet astonishment, as if waiting for an explanation. Not the faintest of smiles came into her thin face.

"I will tell Miss Seaton," she said after a pause. "Please walk in."

She showed me into the dingy undusted drawing-room, filled with evening sunshine and with the green-dyed light that penetrated the leaves overhanging the long French windows. I sat down and waited on and on, occasionally aware of a creaking footfall overhead. At last the door opened a little, and the great face I had once known peered round at me. For it was enormously changed; mainly, I think, because the old eyes had rather suddenly failed, and so a kind of stillness and darkness lay over its calm and wrinkled pallor.

"Who is it?" she asked.

I explained myself and told her the occasion of my visit.

She came in and shut the door carefully after her and, though the fumbling was scarcely perceptible, groped her way to a chair. She had on an old dressing-gown, like a cassock, of a patterned cinnamon colour.

"What is it you want?" she said, seating herself and lifting her blank face to mine.

"Might I just have Arthur's address?" I said deferentially. "I am so sorry to have disturbed you."

"H'm. You have come to see my nephew?"

"Not necessarily to see him, only to hear how he is, and, of course, Mrs. Seaton, too. I am afraid my silence must have appeared"

"He hasn't noticed your silence," croaked the old voice out of the great mask; "besides, there isn't any Mrs. Seaton."

"Ah, then," I answered, after a momentary pause, "I have not seemed so black as I painted myself! And how is Miss Outram?"

"She's gone into Yorkshire," answered Seaton's aunt.

"And Arthur too?"

She did not reply, but simply sat blinking at me with lifted chin, as if listening, but certainly not for what I might have to say. I began to feel rather at a loss.

"You were no close friend of my nephew's, Mr. Smithers?" she said presently.

"No," I answered, welcoming the cue, "and yet, do you know, Miss Seaton, he is one of the very few of my old schoolfellows I have come across in the last few years, and I suppose as one gets older one begins to value old associations" My voice seemed to trail off into a vacuum. "I thought Miss Outram," I hastily began again, "a particularly charming girl. I hope they are both quite well."

Still the old face solemnly blinked at me in silence.

"You must find it very lonely, Miss Seaton, with Arthur away?"

"I was never lonely in my life," she said sourly. "I don't look to flesh and blood for my company. When you've got to be my age, Mr. Smithers (which God forbid), you'll find life a very different affair from what you seem to think it is now. You won't seek company then, I'll be bound. It's thrust on you." Her face edged round into the clear green light, and her eyes groped, as it were, over my vacant, disconcerted face. "I dare say, now," she said, composing her mouth, "I dare say my nephew told you a good many tarradiddles in his time. Oh, yes, a good many, eh? He was always a liar. What, now, did he say of me? Tell me, now." She leant forward as far as she could, trembling, with an ingratiating smile.

"I think he is rather superstitious," I said coldly, "but, honestly, I have a very poor memory, Miss Seaton."

"Why?" she said. "*I haven't.*"

"The engagement hasn't been broken off, I hope."

"Well, between you and me," she said, shrinking up and with an immensely confidential grimace, "it has."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry to hear it. And where is Arthur?"

"Eh?"

"Where is Arthur?"

We faced each other mutely among the dead old bygone furniture. Past all my scrutiny was that large, flat, grey, cryptic countenance. And then, suddenly, our eyes for the first time really met. In some indescribable way out of that thick-lidded

obscurity a far small something stooped and looked out at me for a mere instant of time that seemed of almost intolerable protraction. Involuntarily I blinked and shook my head. She muttered something with great rapidity, but quite inarticulately; rose and hobbled to the door. I thought I heard, mingled in broken mutterings, something about tea.

"Please, please, don't trouble," I began, but could say no more, for the door was already shut between us. I stood and looked out on the long-neglected garden. I could just see the bright greenness of Seaton's old tadpole pond. I wandered about the room. Dusk began to gather, the last birds in that dense shadowiness of trees had ceased to sing. And not a sound was to be heard in the house. I waited on and on, vainly speculating. I even attempted to ring the bell; but the wire was broken, and only jangled loosely at my efforts.

I hesitated, unwilling to call or to venture out, and yet more unwilling to linger on, waiting for a tea that promised to be an exceedingly comfortless supper. And as darkness drew down, a feeling of the utmost unease and disquietude came over me. All my talks with Seaton returned on me with a suddenly enriched meaning. I recalled again his face as we had stood hanging over the staircase, listening in the small hours to the inexplicable stirrings of the night. There were no candles in the room; every minute the autumnal darkness deepened. I cautiously opened the door and listened, and with some little dismay withdrew, for I was uncertain of my way out. I even tried the garden, but was confronted under a veritable

thicket of foliage by a padlocked gate. It would be a little too ignominious to be caught scaling a friend's garden fence!

Cautiously returning into the still and musty drawing-room, I took out my watch, and gave the incredible old woman ten minutes in which to reappear. And when that tedious ten minutes had ticked by I could scarcely distinguish its hands. I determined to wait no longer, drew open the door, and, trusting to my sense of direction, groped my way through the corridor that I vaguely remembered led to the front of the house.

I mounted three or four stairs and, lifting a heavy curtain, found myself facing the starry fanlight of the porch. From here I glanced into the gloom of the dining-room. My fingers were on the latch of the outer door when I heard a faint stirring in the darkness above the hall. I looked up and became conscious of, rather than saw, the huddled old figure looking down on me.

There was an immense hushed pause. Then, "Arthur, Arthur," whispered an inexpressibly peevish aspring voice, "is that you? Is that you, Arthur?"

I can scarcely say why, but the question horribly startled me. No conceivable answer occurred to me. With head craned back, hand clenched on my umbrella, I continued to stare up into the gloom, in this fatuous confrontation.

"Oh, oh;" the voice croaked. "It is you, is it? That disgusting man! . . . Go away out. Go away out."

Hesitating no longer. I caught open the door and,

slamming it behind me, ran out into the garden, under the gigantic old sycamore, and so out at the open gate.

I found myself half up the village street before I stopped running. The local butcher was sitting in his shop reading a piece of newspaper by the light of a small oil-lamp. I crossed the road and enquired the way to the station. And after he had with minute and needless care directed me, I asked casually if Mr. Arthur Seaton still lived with his aunt at the big house just beyond the village. He poked his head in at the little parlour door.

"Here's a gentleman enquiring after young Mr. Seaton, Millie," he said. "He's dead, ain't he?"

"Why, yes, bless you," replied a cheerful voice from within. "Dead and buried these three months or more—young Mr. Seaton. And just before he was to be married, don't you remember, Bob?"

I saw a fair young woman's face peer over the muslin of the little door at me.

"Thank you," I replied, "then I go straight on?"

"That's it, sir; past the pond, bear up the hill a bit to the left, and then there's the station lights before your eyes."

We looked intelligently into each other's faces in the beam of the smoky lamp. But not one of the many questions in my mind could I put into words.

And again I paused irresolutely a few paces further on. It was not, I fancy, merely a foolish apprehension of what the raw-boned butcher might "think" that prevented my going back to see if I could find Seaton's grave in the benighted churchyard. There

was precious little use in pottering about in the muddy dark merely to discover where he was buried. And yet I felt a little uneasy. My rather horrible thought was that, so far as I was concerned—one of his extremely few friends—he had never been much better than “buried” in my mind.

THE BIRD OF TRAVEL

WE had been talking of houses—their looks and ways and influences. What shallow defences they were, we agreed, even for the materialist, with their brittle glass, and baked clay bricks; and what mere fungi most of them. Worse still—the dreadful species that isn't haunted *at all*, not even by the graces or disgraces of its inmates—mere barracks deaf to life and insensitive even to the weathers of heaven. A cherry-eyed little man of the name of Bate-son, I remember, told us of a house he had known that had year by year gently and furtively shifted itself a few feet down its valley towards the sea. A full green mile to go. He said it was the property of a family so fair of skin and hair as to be almost albinos—but still, a happy one.

Somebody capped this with the ancient yarn of Lord Montberris, who built a new wing to his family edifice every year, till the estate was utterly ruined. Whereupon he set fire to the place in the vain hope of getting rid of its Devil *that way*. And at last a quaint old creature whose name I have forgotten, but who, so I was told, had been something of a versifier in his younger days, told us the following rather pointless story, about a house called the Wood.

"I must have been scarcely in my first breeches," he began, rubbing his hand down his face, as if he was sleepy, "when I first heard of the old house called the Wood. We lived then—my own people I mean—some few miles distant from it as the crow flies. There was a remote kinship with its inmates—people of a

restless blood and with a fair acreage of wild oats to their credit. A quarrel, a mild feud of the Montague and Capulet order, had separated us ; and—well, we rarely mentioned them ; their name was seldom heard. But an old relative of my mother's who lived with us in those days used to tell us about the house, warning us, in that peculiarly enticing fashion old people have, not to tempt Providence in that direction. Let but its evil genius squawk once in our young ears—we might never come back. That kind of thing.

The consequence was, that while we were still mere infants, my younger sister and I—she in a dark green tartan frock, I remember—set out one early morning, fully intending to see or hear the strange Bird that was reported to haunt its chaces and its glades. What if it did instil into us the wander-lust ? It was just what we wanted—Seven League Boots. We hoped—with beating hearts—even to sprinkle a grain or two of salt on its tail !

But we never pushed as far as the house itself, nor even into the denser woods amongst which it lay. We sat in the sun-glazed buttercups and ate our dinner, and, I think, forgot our errand beneath the blossoming may-trees.

“Later, I tried the same experiment alone. It was winter then. Deep snow lay on the ground, and I pushed on through the woods until I was actually in sight of the upper windows of the house. Dusk was beginning to thicken—its strange thievish blur creeping across the whiteness of the snow. Presently, I found myself in a sort of walk or alley between a high hedge of yew and beech. And as I stood there, hes-

itating whether to go on or to turn back, a figure—a child of about my own age—appeared at its further end. She was dressed, I remember, in a cloak with a hood—crimson, I think, and carried a muff.

“At that very instant, as our young eyes met across the wintry air, the last of the evening’s robins broke into its tiny, shrill, almost deafening peal of notes. And fled. What is it in such moments that catches the heart back, and stamps them on the memory as if they were tidings of another world? Neither of us stirred. A little snow fell from the vacant twig.

The scarcely visible, narrow, and, to my young eyes, strangely beautiful face gazed on at me. I might even then have realised that we were fated some day to meet again. But even if I had, I should hardly have surmised it would prove as eventlessly.

“Then I was shy—a gawky boy. Moreover, I was on forbidden ground. I naturally fancied, too, any such distant cousin might resent my being there—a stranger and uninvited. With a curious drag of my body in the dead silence that had followed the song, I began a tuneless sort of airy whistling, turned on my heel and crunched off in the snow. When in the white darkening alley I cast back this phantom creature a thief-like glance out of the corner of my eye, she had vanished.

“I don’t suggest that this incident left much impression on me—though I remember every detail of it to this day. Then Life called me away; and it was at least a score or so of years afterwards, while wandering one afternoon in the neighbourhood of my old home again, that I chanced on a finger-post pointing

and stooping towards a thicket of trees beyond a grassy lane, and marked "To the Wood."

"I had seen something of the world by then, and without excessive satisfaction. The old story came back to mind. It linked up two selves rather crudely severed. I dropped a friendly nod at the post and turned off in its direction. The path—a pretty soggy one after the heavy summer rains—led through neglected preserves, and after walking for half an hour or so, I came out into a kind of clearing. And there amid the serene quietude of its remarkably dense woods was the long, low house.

"Its walls, once grey, were now densely mantled with greenery—rose, jasmine, wistaria. It showed, however, little trace of age or change. An unusual silence hung over its scene. No smoke, or sign of occupancy ; indeed, all but one of the windows within view were shuttered. I doubt if the Ancient Mariner's spectral barque more eloquently expressed desertion and vacancy.

"For a few minutes I leaned over a decrepit gate, my eyes roving to and fro across the wide stone façade. The whole place looked as if it had settled its eyelids and composed its mouth for a protracted and stagnant sleep. I have heard of toads being found immured but yet alive in the virgin rock of a coal mine : it looked like that. At last I made my way up the weedy path, and, at the back of the house, where even yet a few hardy human vegetables contested the soil with Nature's wildlings, I discovered a door on the latch.

"I tapped and listened ; tapped and listened again ; and, as if it were Echo herself, some hidden thrush's

rapping of a snail's shell against its sacrificial stone was my only answer. Then, at a venture, I pushed open the door, stepped in, and making my way along a narrow passage, entered a little morning room whose air was burdened with a faint odour as of sweetish mildew—long-faded flowers perhaps. A piano stood where the window might best illuminate the singer, and a few pictures in water-colour hung on the low walls. A volume of music lay open on the table: It was Gounod's "How beautiful upon the mountains."

"I passed from room to room, and from an attie window surveyed many acres —*verts*, one might say —of the tree-tops—of the motionless woods. And there my mind lapsed into a sort of daydream. So closely familiar seemed all around me that I even began to doubt my own memory. The chests and cupboards, the posied carpets on the uneven floors, the faint nosegays of the wall-paper—surely one couldn't so instantly "recognise," so to speak, objects seen for the first time. And yet—well, most rare human experience is like that.

"One talks of the *years* of childhood: centuries would be a better word. The sense of this familiarity, this recognition—was only the sharper, the more wistful (to use an old-fashioned word) for the fact that the house was vacant, except for the faces upon its walls. Through narrow crannies sunshine had sucked the brightness of their colours from tapestry and curtain. The she-spider had woven and withered in her snares; and a legionary dust, like fine gold, floated and whirled in a beam of the declining sun, when I drew the shutter.

"I spent the next hour or so that remained of daylight in roaming the woods, half-elated, half-ashamed at my trespass, descending into every hollow, ascending every steep, but, nowhere surprised any secret, and nowhere confronted hint of ghost of man or beast. Indeed, so shut in was the house by its trees that from no point of vantage, so far as I could discover, could one command any glimpse of the country beyond the valley. It had been built in a bowl of verdure and foliage. And for those who had occupied it, rumour of the world must have been carried by the winds across the hills, unheeded in this hollow.

"And then, while I was slowly returning towards it once more, under the still, reddish, evening sky, suddenly I heard thrice repeated an extraordinary call. It pierced my mind like an arrow. It almost absurdly startled me—like the shrilling of a decoy, as if my own name had been called in a strange or forgotten tongue.

"Of English birds, the blackcap, perhaps, sings with a vestige of that wild and piercing sweetness. Imagine such a voice twenty times more vigorous suddenly breaking in upon that evening silence—falling on from note to note as if some unearthly traveller were summoning from afar his strayed dog on the hillside !

"Yet it was evidently a bird that had screamed, for presently after, as I stood hotly, attentively listening, I saw mount nobly into the deep blue air and wheel into the darker thicket a bird of the form and wing of a kestrel, but much larger—its plumage of an almost snowy whiteness, and of a flight inexpressively serene.

"I heard no more his cry, though I listened long ; nor did I set eyes on the bird again, either then, or afterwards : though the woods were motionless and so silent the gloaming it seemed as if the world had swooned.

"I was ridiculously elated with my adventure. Had I not now encountered the veritable Bird of Travel, which childish legend had credited with such fabulous powers ? Here was the deserted house, and still echoing in my heart that cry, the lure, as of some innocent Banshee. Who, I wondered, had last heard the call in the green spring, and felt leap and kindle insatiable desire. The past slid back. I was a child again; looking up into the withered old face of my childhood :—

"But is it *true*, grandmamma ? Please tell us, is it *true*?"

"True, my dears ? Why I myself perfectly well remember Hamilton and Paul when they were boys not so very many years older than yourselves. I remember, too, my father telling me how, one autumn evening, while he and these two friends of his were returning with their guns and spaniels through the woods, the bird had flown out screaming above their heads. *He* stopped up his ears. *He* had his work to do. But the other two lads watched it in the air, drinking in its forbidden song. Nothing anyone could say could restrain them then. Poor fellows !—fine handsome fellows. And now, Hamilton lies far away, unburied amid the Andes, and Paul drowned in the Straits of Magellan."

"It didn't matter how far the old lady wandered from her theme of this family's destiny, and of their

house, and of this ominous bird, she invariably concluded her narrative with this faint, high, trembling refrain—‘And now, Hamilton lies far away, unburied amid the Andes, and Paul drowned in the Straits of Magellan.’”

“*O Keith of Ravelston, the sorrows of thy line!*”

“So ran the ancient story. And had I not that very afternoon returned the painted gaze of these young gentlemen? It seems to me, too, though you may build pretty strongly in this world, even the most substantial of us must depart in time. All the long annals of this family, anyhow, were a record of unrest, of fruitless (or worse) venture, of that absurd nomad instinct—travellers to whom had come eventually, far from home, the same practised, inevitable guide. Well, there are some of us who prefer the kind of travel that can be enjoyed in an armchair !

“I had cast one last full look behind me and was returning by the path I have mentioned, cumbered with weeds and brambles, when I looked up from out of my thoughts, and saw approaching me a lady. A bright chill half-moon had now risen in the twilight above the woods, and I could see her face distinctly in its thin radiance. The brows were high and narrow (for she was carrying her hat in her hand), the nose was long, like the noses in some old Italian pictures ; the chin firm, yet rounded to a point.

“I could see her plainly in the silverish dusk-light : and yet, oddly enough, for a moment no flash of recognition told me who she was. And then I knew. She eyed me sharply and fully, almost arrogantly, a dark flush in her cheeks, and bowed. I apologised as

best as I could for my intrusion. I reminded her of the former neighbourhood and acquaintance of our families ; and told her of my childish curiosity to explore the woods, yes, and confessed to having heard the wondrous Phœnix, and confronted its victims.

"She listened with face slightly averted, and now turned with a lively smile. 'You have guessed right,' she said, 'the portraits are of my great-uncles ; and I am the child you—but evidently you don't remember that So please say no more. How I love those pictures—those two outlandish brilliant faces. · A bad painter may be a queerly telling artist.'

"She glanced into my eyes with a peculiar smile on her lips. 'You see, nowadays, so far as my own family is concerned, I am the last,' she continued. 'So you will realise how welcome even the remotest of cousins must be ! Of all these years—all those births and deaths, and births again—there is not one left of us in this world here except me.' She glanced up under the half-moon with shining eyes, almost as if in apology, yet still, as if in boast.

"'And are you a traveller, too ?'" I questioned.

"She beckoned me to follow her back by the way I had come.

"A traveller? No indeed. Not I. Our bright particular genius has always refused to meddle the least bit with me. I used to lie awake half the night long, summer and winter too, in hope to be exiled. That was years and years ago ; the mad 'teens. But deep, deep down, perhaps, I feared my own desire. I cannot tell you—this place is rooted in my heart. It *is* me. Here, only, I seem to catch at the meaning of being

alive at all. It is a little lodge, and yonder winds the mysterious avenue. I'll wait. Forgive such nonsense ; but it is that incessant expectation—*incessant* ; boxes packed and corded, as it were, the door ajar. It is *that* I hunger for—for then And this quiet—it is always silent in these woods. The winds and storms go over us, you see, like the waters in the book of Job. I never remember it when I am away—this curious quiet even beneath the hollow tumult of a gale far overhead—without an almost unendurable shudder of longing. Shall I ever cease if I begin to talk of it ? But now I see that with that longing, that greed—far, far beyond the greed of the little girl I used to be even for ices and macaroons (and would you believe it, to see a ghost !)—it was like keeping a wild beast without meat, to deny my poor heart its native air. Better dead than dying. It was an extraordinary home-coming—this very morning. I was alone. I got back early, soon after daybreak, and opened a window to the first rose of dawn. I cannot tell you the *voracity* of it all : the dew, the depth, and the immortal usualness.

“ ‘And now—well, really it is *very* delightful—though an hour ago I should have madly resented such an idea—it *is* delightful to have found so old an unknown friend waiting me—and one remembered so well.’

“ She laughed out, when I tried to excuse myself for so dull a memory.

“ ‘That's because you are a poet, Mr.——’ she said. ‘ You see, I know all about you ; and you, nothing about me ! I have noticed it again and again.

People with imagination are almost indecently bereft of the common feelings. And now, will you please sit on this bench while I make some tea for us both. It's all I can offer. I shan't be long. But stuff your fingers into your ears. He screams at night too ! Now which was the door I left unfastened ?

"I sat there—where she had left me. The moon slid on, casting her shadows. A few late moths ghosted about me in and out of her beams. It might have been a dream. I might have been thousands of years old. Strange, that. Strange. Why, I might have been in another world . . . But never mind that.

"Well, my unconventional hostess returned in a few minutes, and we sat sipping our tea on the little balcony in the mild autumnal night.

"And as we sat we talked—as fancy led ; she in a rather high-pitched voice, and with curious half-gestures. It seemed as if she thought always with arrow on the string and bow bent—a bow which a dull world had invariably reminded her to slacken. Her eyes were extraordinarily dark and lustrous in the shadow of that thin clear light, revealing, it seemed, a curious exaltation of spirit at this sudden and strange return to solitude and to her old home. She exulted in her solitude, and had not the least misgiving at the thought of staying indefinitely in the house.

" 'It won't be for long,' she repeated. 'They have patched and tortured and experimented, and at last I am done. They've as good as told me so now, the poor dear, scientific creatures. Surely it is not surrender when the wound is mortal and the enemy is—

that one. But *enemy!* What shallow, stuffy nonsense *that is!* We have handed down our restless memories, the old forlorn absurdities, father to son and son again, and now I am, well, just the last echo of the refrain before the end. ‘Ah, Elizabeth,’ mother used to laugh at me in the old days when we were a happy family in the Wood, ‘he will sing to you too in due season.’ Probably she meant a far tamer fowl. In her heart of hearts she hated the wander-taint, as you may imagine. And yet—she herself at last couldn’t resist it. We are wayfaring men one and all and *my* journey will be better than dreams.’

“There was a peculiar sidelong movement of her head, as she said this; she was stooping a little, busied over the tea-things. With teapot poised in one thin narrow hand, she suddenly turned on me.

“‘Shall I tell you why? Shall I?’ Again that curious movement, and I fancied for an instant that she was about to cry. ‘It is because *I* am coming back.’

“For an instant or two I did not catch her meaning; then, with that odd warmth and confusion within one’s very body which any unforeseen reference to death inevitably brings, I muttered a few of the familiar clichés. ‘Besides,’ I added, ‘look at me. Surely this face is nearer the sight of death than yours. You cannot see your own in this moonlight. Shall we have a wager on it? And pay—when at last we meet again? For good? Come, now.’

“‘Yes, but you see,’ she replied eagerly, ‘it’s all very well to talk about happy reunions. Where? Call it a condition of mind; whose? Surely that which found the very bones of its delight here? Do you re-

member what Catherine says in *Wuthering Heights*? But there, never mind, when *my* bird wings free, I know its resting place. I *know* it. You see? The ones that have gone—they changed little; but strangely and instantaneously. And now they thrid some finer air, have rarer senses, and their tap is heard on walls of the mind that are scarcely there, so tenuous they are. Not that I want proof. And such proof! I *know* it. And when your time comes, I give you my invitation now. What *is* that old phoenix of ours? Do you suppose we could snare him, cage him; tie him to a perch? Isn't he in our very minds? How then? Could we be else than wanderers? May we be forgiven for this futile waste of its powers.'

"I suppose I was a little taken aback by this outpouring. For she leaned her face into her hands and laughed.

"Just 'hysteria,' you are thinking,' she said suddenly, looking up at me from them. I sat in the shadow now, so perhaps my face was not too clearly visible.

"But what *is* this coming back?" I stupidly questioned.

"Oh, but you don't understand," she cried, turning breathlessly on me. "It is here now. And then, shall I not see? shall I not know? and probably before the very last of these leaves is fallen? Oh, how I detest the sentimentality they talk; fobbing us off with their precious stones and golden harps. Symbols if you like, but beyond any poor earthly spirit's hope or desire. If we humans have *climbed* to where we are—though I don't believe it—by way of the happy and innocent animals, do you suppose we are going

to suddenly jump half-a-dozen stories instead of ascending on and on and on? What is space but the all I am? What is time but the all I was and shall be? I cannot express myself, but if you could hear the roaring of the fire *here*, you would not be wanting any words. Never in the whole of my reading, in the whole queer skein of things called my life—never have I encountered a single human being who expressed a tenth of the sheer delight of sharing—well, say, just that bit of garish moon in this tiny bowl of the world's greenery. 'Blind,' 'ungrateful,' 'wornis of earth,' no word in the language could express our fatuity. *Then* I shall be free. . . . But there, it's time, as the old Scottish ballad says, *you were awa'*. And it's time, as some less anonymous poet says, I sought my couch. I confess I hated the very sight of you when I saw you trespassing in my woods. Another hereditary taint. But you have forgiven me . . . and I will walk a little distance with you on your way.'

"Well, I confess, her vehemence had stirred up my sluggish mind a good deal more even than had the bird before her. I followed her all but in silence. We came to a kind of alley, its yew hedge long untended, though the light of the moon pierced through upon its sward.

"She paused, her face averted. 'And now'—she said, 'goodbye, for this life. Yours that way; mine this. And may all that is meant by heaven be with you.'

"I did as I was bid. Silence crept in upon me—an entire world—like a dangerous flood. The grass was hoar with a moonlight almost as white as snow. The years seemed to melt away like a dream,

and, as I turned, seeing her there still waiting, I realised that she herself must have devised this echo of our first and only other meeting. The strange rapt face looked curiously unreal. With queer contrary thoughts in my mind, I gazed across at her, not more trustful of my eyes perhaps in that uncertain light than I had been of my ears earlier in the evening. She did not stir. All perfectly still things seem to have a look of agelessness and of the eternal. And then—I turned on my heel, and when, now no longer a shy awkward silly boy, I looked back as of old and for the last time; again it was in vain. She was gone. . . . ”

So this, it appeared was all. This was the story of “The Wood”! We others glanced a little uncomfortably at one another, I remember, at this crisis in the evening’s talk—a poet’s story in sober earnest: incoherent, obscure, unreal, unlikeness, without an ending.

“And the Bird?” cried one of us, maybe a little more “fatuous” than the rest. The old man was at that moment beckoning to the Club waiter, and appeared not to have noticed the question. And nobody, it seemed, had either the stupidity or the courage to add, “And what, pray, are *you* waiting for?”

THE BOWL

It was one autumn evening—in the month of October, I think, for I can just remember that the thin gold and tawny beechleaves were still floating down in the garden in the hazy sunshine, and that already a fire burned in the grate to cheer the colder twilights, when first my very young eyes fell in wonder upon Mrs. Orchardson's silver bowl. Perhaps it had always been there, and always as conspicuous. But it was now, I am sure, that I first noticed it. It stood on the sideboard beside a cut-glass decanter reflecting the ruddy colour of its wine in the smooth cheeks of its two laughing Cupids. It had handles, two pendant rings as plain in workmanship as the buckle on a child's shoe. I stood and stared up at it, as young eyes will at any such magical object. There was a sort of secret jollity in the very look of it—an air to blow bubbles in, cool as an orchard, or as the half-hidden valleys of a summer cloud.

I was astonished at it, entranced by it ; longed to touch and handle it, and even felt, I verily believe, a kind of covetousness and an envy of the friend whose bowl it was. And if I had been a jackdaw of equal proportions to myself, I should certainly have carried it off to hide in the chimney or hole in the wall, wherever my nest might be. As it was, I at least carried off a very vivid remembrance of it in my mind—which, fortunately, in a world hedged about with a superfluity of *Dont's*, is not a felony.

Anyhow, when one dark rainy morning the sharp need came for *something* of this kind, it was I who

thought of the bowl, which, after all, could contain almost as much Jordan water as could the freestone font in St. Barnabas's, and was twenty times more beautiful.

All through the night, while I had been placidly asleep, I learned at my lonely breakfast, my friend Mrs. Orchardson's little baby had been simply burning like a coal at death's door. It was a most interesting and entralling piece of news. And I'm not so sure that I did not speculate how it was that in my long nocturnal journeyings in the wilds of dream-land, I had not heard its wailing cries as it, too, a much smaller spirit, ran along into the shadowy valley. For after all, abstractions like death are for a child little more than a vague and menacing something in a dream.

Mrs. Orchardson's baby had, of course, been sickening for some little time past. I had been angry and jealous more than once because it had been the cause of my seeing very little of her, and of my being entertained : good deal less than I thought proper on so short a visit. I could remember well enough its little blue-eyed puckered face and slatey-blue eyes, with an expression in them too, almost as dull as slate. Indeed, one morning, not long before—an unusually hot morning for October—she and I and it had sate on a rug in the garden together under the elms. A few withered wild flowers still showed in the grass, I remember, with nothing but their swollen seed vessels left of their summer.

And I had noticed, too, how peculiar a shiningness had come into Mrs. Orchardson's grey eyes when she

talked to her baby. Yet anxiety kept her forehead frowning even while she was smiling, as she stared down into its small ugly wizened face. I didn't think it was in the least a pretty baby, and was vexed at its persisting in being ill.

These last few days, indeed, I had been left almost entirely to myself, with nobody to say a word to, except Esther, the parlourmaid—a sandy-coloured woman with a thick down on her face—and now and then to Mrs. Orchardson's cook, who had a way of speaking to me as if I were a kind of clockwork image incapable of even hearing her words. "And how is the poor little infant this morning?" I asked her once, mimicking the old doctor. She looked at me as if I were a snake in the grass—as no doubt I was.

But to come back to the silver bowl again. I had finished my bread and milk, had for the third time shooed away the cat from getting on to the table, and now sat staring through the long rainy window with my spoon in my mouth, when the door opened, and Mrs. Orchardson put her face in at it. It was gray, almost like wet chalk, and her eyes were so sharp and far-off-looking that she seemed scarcely to be aware of me at all. She was certainly looking at me, and yet as if through me, and with almost as horrified an expression as if she could see the very bones in my body. And then, suddenly she came in, almost fell down on her knees beside my chair, clasped me round, and hid her face in my lap. "O, Nick, Nick, you poor lonely thing," she said, sobbing, "she is worse, much, much worse. She is dying."

"Oh, dear!" I said in a mournful voice, "oh, dear!"

"So you will just try," she went on hurriedly, as if she were saying something that at any moment might be forgotten, "you will just try to be quiet and happy, by yourself. It won't be long ; not very long." She paused, and I sat on as still as the loaf of bread on the table. She did not seem even to be breathing. But in a minute or two she lifted her wet face from my pinafore, and was looking entirely different from herself. I should hardly have recognised her—and yet she was quite calm, though her cheeks were almost like clay and her eyes as if they had fallen a little back into her head. "And now, you see," she added, as if not to me at all, "Mr. Cairns is coming to christen her, to make her God's little child. As you are, Nick."

"Isn't it going to be taken to Church, then?" I said in a sepulchral voice.

"No," she answered, listening, but not to me.

"But why?" I said in disappointment. She put her hands to my cheeks, cupping my chin in them, and simply looking at me.

"But," I said wriggling away, "there's no font here : there *must* be a font like as at Church." I frowned, looking at her a little scornfully out of the corner of my eye. "It won't be much good, if you don't. At least that's what Esther says."

She only shook her head, still gazing at me, and listening. "I know!" I said, "will that big silver bowl on the sideboard do for a font, Mrs. Orchardson? It's a very big bowl."

She smiled at me brightly.

"Why, of course, you strange creature, that will

do beautifully. . . . And now——” She got up, and stood looking for a moment out of the window, as if she had forgotten my presence altogether. “In all this loveliness!” she almost whispered, though all that she could see was just an ordinary wet morning. . .

Dr. Sharp would not return again for an hour, so there were only Mrs. Orchardson, and Esther and Mr. Cairns in the bedroom besides myself and the baby. The cook, I heard, wouldn’t come, because she was afraid of being upset. That seemed silly to me. When I went into the room, a little square table already stood between the fire and the sunshine, and it was covered with a linen napkin with a fringe. On this were burning two tall white candles in silver sticks ; and in the midst was the bowl with a little water in it which by tiptoeing I could just manage to see. I stared between surprise and dismay at Mr. Cairns when he came in in his surplice. He seemed to be a person absolutely different from the two Mr. Cairns, I knew already—the one a smiling but rather silly-smiling elderly man in his old clerical clothes in the Vicarage garden ; the other, of course, looking almost artificial, as he stood intoning the service in church.

Having blown out the candles, and placed them on the dressing table ; he signed to us to stand up, myself being between Mrs. Orchardson and Esther, and the baby lying still and scarlet and open-eyed and without a single sound in Mrs. Orchardson’s arms. Once I remember, as he leaned over towards her, Mr. Cairn’s surplice brushed my cheek with its peculiar dry perfume of cambric. And when he dipped his

fingers into the bowl I saw the water-butterflies jig on the ceiling.

He did not seem to have noticed that I was there, though for a moment or two his glasses blazed on me like lanterns when he fronted the window. He took the little baby in his great hands. It had begun to cry then. But its crying was more like a very, very old woman's than a natural baby's, and the fingers it spread out in the air an instant were like white match-sticks, they were so thin and shrunken. I smiled at it and made a grimace to please it, but it looked at me like purple glass, as if it was not there to see me or to be amused.

When the service was done, Mr. Cairns stooped down and kissed the baby and he looked a very old man indeed ; and yet when he stood up again and had taken off his stole and surplice, he was exactly the same as when I had seen him reading in his garden.

"My dear, dear lady, you must not grieve over-much," he said to Mrs. Orchardson, at the door of the bedroom, "He knows His lambs, all His lambs. And He is merciful."

He leant his chin, and smiled towards me with a curious wrinkle on his face. His brown eyes reminded me of berries. They were full of kindness even though the look in them was not very attentive. I whispered to Esther, asking if I might be allowed to carry the silver bowl downstairs again. And all she gave me was a sharp shake of the head and a greenish look, because I don't think she liked to say no while Mr. Cairns was in hearing. He must have heard what I said, because he put his fingers on my

hair and smiled at me again, so that I had to go downstairs in front of him, and I think he must have told Mrs. Orchardson meanwhile what to do with the bowl and the water.

In the hall he talked for a minute or two in secret with Esther. "In that case send the little boy to me, then," I heard him say. "Mrs. Cairns will be at home. Poor tiny lamb! To think it must have suffered like you and me!" Esther shut her fair-lashed eyes a moment as if to show it would be a mercy if the baby did die, and then opened them again very stern and mournfully when she saw me watching her.

Yet in my heart of hearts I was perfectly sure that Mrs. Orchardson's little baby would *not* die. I cannot tell whence this assurance came. It may have been the fruit of a child's natural intuition; or even of his exquisite eyesight—experienced, as it would seem, to see through, and not only on the surface. But for one thing, I had all along felt a firm belief in the inherent virtue of the bowl, and was contemptuous of Esther for shutting her eyes like that. It seemed impossible that the clear shallow water in its shadowy deeps should not wash all taint of sickness away. Besides, I had thought of it.

This, I think was the reason why I flatly refused to accept Mr. Cairns's invitation to go to the Rectory, when Esther told me to do so. I knew perfectly well she wouldn't be able to make me go against my will while the baby was so ill. At last she gave a furious empty toss with my gray wool scarf that she was carrying in her hand, and looked at me as if no tongue could express her hatred.

"And don't you feel *no* pity for that poor suffering mite upstairs, you obstinate boy?" she asked me in a low compressed voice. I merely stared at her without answering, and she had to turn her eyes away.

"He don't even know the meaning of the word!" she said, and shut the door of the dining-room after her as if she hoped its wood would stick for ever after to the lintel. But I did not mind her temper. Presently she came in again, looking even angrier and whiter than before.

"Is this the time for building and Noah's-arking," she almost shouted in my ear as I sat on the hearth-rug; "is *this* the time?—when that poor little innocent is rattling its very life out over your head?"

I looked no further up at her than at the tray in her hand. "You little imp!"

"I suppose when it gets well, it will have to be christened all over again, *properly*, won't it?" I enquired. I knew she was staring at me, and hating me for not caring what she said.

"Where,"—she gasped almost losing herself in her rage, "where you pick up such evil heathenish notions from, I can't think. Not from *this* house. There's not a speck of sin left in the whole of that infant's body now; not a speck. And if you had gone to that kind Mr. Cairns as he arst, he would have *told* you so."

"I didn't want to go, and Mrs. Orchardson wouldn't have tried to make me." The blood seemed to rise up in my body and I could hear my own voice growing more insolent and trumpeting every moment. "What's more, Miss Esther, I don't believe a

bit in your old holy water. It isn't *going* to die, and even if you hope it will, it won't. And you're treading on one of my animals."

At that she deliberately kicked down the fort I was building with her foot.

"You are a little devil incarnate ; that's what you are," she screamed at me, if one can scream without raising one's voice. "A little devil. You ought never to have been allowed in a Christian house. It's Tophet and the roaring flames that you're bound for, my young man. You've *murdered* that poor mite. You mark my words!"

I was so much enraged at this that I hit at a little bulge in her boot with one of my bricks.

"You're a beast," I bawled at her in a voice no louder than her own. "You're a filthy beast. And I don't mind where I go, so long as *you* aren't there. Not a--not a *dam'*."

Her face was so close to mine in its hatred that I saw her eyes change, and her lips stiffen, as if she was afraid. "You wait, Master Nicholas; you wait! For that vile horrid word! You wait! The master shall hear of that."

I laughed at her sneeringly. "I dare you to say it to him. He wouldn't care ; he thinks you're a stupid hairy woman. And I think you're *hateful!*" She lifted her hand and shut her eyes. "O, my God," she said, "I can't stand it," and all but ran out of the room.

When she was gone—with the inside of my stomach feeling as if it were on fire—I climbed the stairs to my bedroom, and, boots and all, flung myself down on the white quilt of the bed.

Nothing happened. The house remained in silence. A flying shower rattled on the window pane, and then the sun returned and shone grey and golden on the raindrops. And I hated everything I looked at. I thought how I would kill Esther ; and how I would kick her body when she was dead.

But gradually the furnace within me began to die down, my "thoughts" wandered away, and my eyelids were drooping into a drowse when I heard a muffled sound of footsteps to and fro, to and fro, ascending from the bedroom immediately beneath me, and I remembered the baby. And suddenly a dark shivering horror turned me to ice, and there, as I lay, I prayed to be forgiven for having been myself, and implored God to let me take its sufferings or to die instead of it. So I lay; flat on my stomach, and prayed.

The afternoon had now grown a little darker in the room, and in a while after this, I must have emptily fallen asleep. For the next thing I remember is finding a cold arm round me in the dregs of the dusk and lips close to my face softly whispering and murmuring, their soft warm breath on my cheek.

"Guess, Nick ! Guess !" said that soft, thrilling voice, when I stirred a little nearer. "Guess !"

I put back my head, and by staring close could just see the light from the window reflected in Mrs. Orchardson's eyes. A curious phosphorescence was there too ; even her skin seemed very faintly to shine.

"Why," I said, "she's much better."

At which those eyes gazed through the narrow air between us as incredulously as if at an angel. "You knew it ; you *knew* it ? You precious holy thing !

And all this while you have been brooding up here by yourself. What can I say? How can I tell you? Oh, Nick, I shall die of happiness."

She squeezed herself closer to me in the vacant space on the bed, clasping me round—her shoulders shaking with what just for a minute I thought was laughing.

"I never *can* say how, Mrs. Orchardson ;" I managed to murmur after a long pause. "But I was quite sure, you know. I don't think grown-up people understand."

"And I don't, either," she said with a little hysterical laugh. "Indeed, indeed I don't. But there—" she raised her face, sat up, put her hands to her hair, and smiled down on me. I too scrambled up ; and could see her plainly now as if by a thin mist-like light from her own body. "Bless me, Nick, I have made your hair all wet with crying. God bless you, my dear. It was all you ; all you."

She sat in silence a moment, but not as if she was thinking. Then suddenly she breathed, and lifted her head. "And now I must go, and we mustn't make the teeniest tiniest little crick of a sound. She is asleep. Follow me down—just two shadows. And don't, Nick, *don't* let me vanish away."

"Will everything," I asked her when we were safely downstairs ; "will everything be just as ordinarily again now, Mrs. Orchardson ?"

"You have missed me, you dear thing ?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder, in the glaring light that now stretched down on us. She was kneeling at the sideboard.

"Esther never says a word, except to make me hate her," I replied. "So, of course, most what she says about me is true. So I think now that the baby's quite better, Mrs. Orchardson, I had better go home again. Even Mr. Cairns wouldn't let me carry the bowl downstairs. And if it hadn't been for that . . . "

The blue of her eyes shone across at me like bits of the sky seen through a window. They opened wider and wider. "But, Nick, my *dear!*!" she cried at last, clear and small as a bird. "I hadn't a notion that you had been unhappy. Indeed, indeed I hadn't. Blind selfish creature that I am. He is shaking, poor darling. He is absolutely worn out!"

And at that I could refrain my self-righteousness and self-commiseration no longer. I ran over to her, bowed myself double beside her on the floor, and sobbed "as if my heart would break."

THE THREE FRIENDS

THE street was narrow ; yet, looking up, the two old friends, bent on their accustomed visit, could discern—beyond a yellow light that had suddenly shone out into the hushed gloom from an attic window—the vast, accumulated thunder-clouds that towered into the darkening zenith.

"That's just it," continued Mr. Eaves, more emphatically, yet more confidentially, "it isn't my health, Sully. I'm not so much afraid of my health. It's—it's my . . ." He took off his hat and drew his hand over his tall, narrow head, but pushed on no further towards the completion of his sentence.

Mr. Sully eyed him stonily. "Don't worry, then," he said. "Why worry? There's worry enough in the world, old sport, without dreaming about it."

"I know," said Mr. Eaves ; "but then, you see, Sully—" They had paused at the familiar swing-door, and now confronted one another in the opaque, sultry silence. And as Mr. Sully stood for an instant in close contact with his old crony in the accentuated darkness of the mock-marble porch, it was just as if a scared rabbit had scurried out of Mr. Eaves's long white face.

"Look here," Mr. Sully exclaimed with sudden frivolity, "we'll ask Miss Lacey" ; and was followed by his feebly protesting companion into the bar.

The long black stuffed bench and oblong mahogany table, darkened here and there by little circular pools of beer, stood close against the wall, and Mr. Sully began to divulge his friend's confidences even

before Miss Lacey could bring them their glasses. A commissionaire sat in the further bar, nodding over an old newspaper ; and Mr. Eaves kept his eyes fixed on his oblong lurching head, while he listened, fascinated and repelled, to his friend's facetiousness.

"Now, supposing, Miss Lacey, my dear," began Mr. Sully shrewdly, half-closing his eyes as if to gloss over his finesse, "supposing a young man, a nice, curly-headed young man—just about our old friend's age here"—Miss Lacey, with a kind of arch and sympathetic good-nature, leaned a large, dark head to glance at Mr. Eaves—"supposing a nice young gentleman—just as it might be our old friend himself here—came, like an innocent, to entrust to your blessed bosom a secret—a sacred secret : what would you do ?"

"Lor' bless me, Mr. Sully, sir, is that all you was coming to ! A secret ? Why, keep it, to be sure ; and not the first time neether." Miss Lacey advanced to the bar, black, precise and cheerful, with the two small, thick glasses in her hand.

"Good," said Mr. Sully, with an almost professional abandon. "Good. So far. But step number two ; supposing, my dear, you couldn't for the life and love of you *help* him in his little difficulty—dependent on his secret, let's say—what then ?"

"Why, I'd keep it all the more," cried Miss Lacey brightly.

"A woman's answer, Eaves ; and none the worse for that," said Mr. Sully. "But on the other hand, supposing you were a practical"—he paused with the little water-jug hovering an inch or two above

his friend's glass—"supposing you were a practical, unromantic old blackguard like me—why, you'd go and tell it to the first lovely blooming creature that came along." He eyed her steadily yet jocosely. "And that's why I'm going to tell it to you, my dear!"

"How you do tease, to be sure!" said Miss Lacey. "He's a real tease, isn't he, Mr. Eaves?"

Mr. Sully's eyes suddenly sobered with overwhelming completeness. He pointed coldly with his stick. "He's been dreaming of hell," he said.

Mr. Eaves, on his part, withdrew large, weak, colourless eyes from the uneasy head of the commissaire, and turned them on Miss Lacey. She glanced at him swiftly, then stooped, and took up a piece of sewing she had laid down on her wooden chair, in the little out-of-the-way bar.

"I don't approve of such subjects," she said, "treated frivolous."

"Gracious goodness, Eaves," said Mr. Sully, "she says 'frivolous.' Hell—'frivolous'!"

"Why," said Miss Lacey lucidly, "I'm not so green as I look."

"Well, you couldn't look younger, if being young's to be green," said Mr. Sully; "and as sure, my dear, as that was a flash of lightning, it—it's the real thing."

When the faint but cumulative rumble of thunder that followed had subsided, Miss Lacey seemed to have withdrawn her attention. Mr. Sully edged slowly round on his feet and faced his friend. "You old skeleton at the feast! You've alarmed the poor child," he said.

Miss Lacey spoke without raising her eyes, bent closely on her needle. "Not me," she said; "but I don't hold with such ideas."

"Tell her yourself," said Mr. Sully to his friend; "tell her yourself: they never *will* believe *me*."

Mr. Eaves shook his head.

"Why not?" said Mr. Sully.

"God bless me," said Mr. Eaves, with sudden heat, "I'm old enough to be her father."

Miss Lacey looked up over her sewing. "You'd scarcely believe *me*," she said mysteriously; "but there was a young gentleman down Charles-street, where I used to be, that had dreams---well, there, shocking! Nobody but me had the patience to listen to him. But you can't give all your attention to one customer, can you? He," she cast a curious glance into the shadows brooding over the commissionaire—"he got up out of his bed one night, just as you or me might—he was living in private apartments, too—struck a match, so they said, and cut his throat. Awful. From ear to ear!" Her thimbled finger made a demure half-circuit of the large pearls of her necklace.

Mr. Sully gazed roundly. "Did he, though? But there, you see," and he leant in great confidence over the counter, "Mr. Eaves here doesn't shave!"

Mr. Eaves smiled vaguely, half-lifting his stick, as if in coquettish acknowledgment of his friend's jest.

"No, no, old friend," he said, "not that, not that, I hope."

"Gracious goodness," said Mr. Sully cordially, "he mustn't take it to heart like that. A dream's a dream."

"Why, of course, it is," said Miss Lacey. "You ought to take more care of yourself, sir ; didn't he, Mr. Sully ?"

Mr. Eaves gazed dispassionately, and yet with some little dignity, in the isolation of attention he had evoked. He turned slowly towards the bar, and stooped a little—confidentially. "Not once, not twice," he said ruminatingly, "but every blessed night. Every blessed night."

Miss Lacey eyed him with searching friendliness.

"Tell her," said Mr. Sully, walking slowly and circumspectly to the door, and peeping out through the cranny into the darkened street.

Mr. Eaves put his empty glass deliberately upon the counter, drew his hand slowly across his lips and shook his head. "It's nothing to tell, when you come to that. And . . ." he nodded a questioning head towards the solitary occupant of the other bar.

"Oh, fast ; bless you," said Miss Lacey. "As reg'lar as clockwork—you'd hardly believe it."

"He'll break his neck, some day," remarked Mr. Sully tersely, "with that jerking."

"You see, my dear," continued Mr. Eaves trustfully, "I don't mind my old friend, Mr. Sully, making a good deal of fun at my expense. He always has : eh, Sully ? But he doesn't *see*. You don't *see*, Sully. There the thing is ; and truth all over it. Facts are facts—in *my* belief."

"But fire and brimstone, and suchlike ; oh no !" said Miss Lacey with a dainty little shudder. "I can't credit it, really ; oh no ! And poor innocent infants, too ! You may think of me what you like, but nothing 'll make me believe *that*."

Mr. Sully looked over his shoulder at Mr. Eaves. "Oh, that," said his old friend, "was only Mr. Sully's fun. He says it's Hell. I didn't. My dream was only —*after*; the state after death, as they call it."

"I see," said Miss Lacey, lucidly, summoning all her intelligence into her face.

Mr. Eaves leaned forward, and all but whispered the curious tidings into her ear. "It's—it's just the same," he said.

"The same?" echoed Miss Lacey. "What?"

"The same," repeated the old man, drawing back, and looking out of his long, grey, meaningless face at the little plump, bright, satiny woman.

"Hell?" breathed Miss Lacey.

"The state after death," called Mr. Sully, still peering into the gloom—and stepped back rather hurriedly in the intense pale lilac illumination of a sudden flickering blaze of lightning.

Thunder now clanged directly overhead, and still Mr. Eaves gazed softly yet earnestly into nothingness, as if in deep thought.

"Whatever you like to call it," he began again steadily pushing his way, "that's how I take it. I sit with my wife, just the same; cap and 'front' and all, just the same; gas burning, decanter on the table, books in the case, marble clock on the mantelpiece, just the same. Or perhaps I'm walking in the street, just the same; carts and shops and dogs, all just the same. Or perhaps I'm here, same as I might be now; with Sully there, and you there, and him there," he nodded towards the commissionaire. "All just the same. For ever, and ever, and ever." He raised his

empty glass to his lips, and glanced almost apologetically towards his old friend. "For ever, and ever," he said, and put it down again.

"He means," said Mr. Sully, "no change : like one of those blessed things on the movies ; over and over again, click, click, click, click, click ; you know. I tell him it's his sentence, my dear."

"But if it's the same," Miss Lacey interposed, with a little docile frown of confusion, "what's different?"

"Mark me, Eaves, my boy," cried Mr. Sully softly at the door ; "it's the ladies for brains, after all. That's what they call a poser. 'What's different,' eh?"

Mr. Eaves pondered in a profound internal silence in the bar. And beyond the windows, the rain streamed steadily in a long-drawn gush of coolness and peace. "What's different?" repeated Mr. Sully, rocking infinitesimally on his heels.

"Why," said Mr. Eaves, "it seems as if there I can't change ; can't. If you were to ask me how I know—why, I couldn't say. It's a dream. But that's what's the difference. There's nothing to come. *Now* : why ! I might change in a score of ways ; just take them as they come. I might fall ill ; or Mrs. Eaves might ; I might come into some money ; marry again. God bless me, I might *die* ! But there, that's all over; endless; no escape; nothing. I can't even die. I'm just myself, Miss Lacey ; Sully, old friend. Just myself, for ever, and ever. Nothing but me looking on at it all, if you take me—just what I've made of it. It's my"—his large pale eyes roved aimlessly—"it's just what Mr. Sully says, I suppose ; it's

my sentence. Eh, Sully? wasn't that it? My sentence?" He smiled courageously.

"Sentence, oh no! Sentence? You!" cried Miss Lacey incredulously. "How could you, Mr. Sully? Sentence! Whatever for, sir?"

Mr. Eaves again glanced vaguely at the sleeper, and then at his friend's round substantial shoulders, rigidly turned on him. He fixed his eyes on the clock.

"You've never done no harm, Mr. Eaves!" cried Miss Lacey, almost as if in entreaty.

"You see," said the old gentleman, glancing over his shoulder, "it isn't what you do: so I seem to take it." Mr. Sully half turned from the door, as if to listen. "It's what you are," said Mr. Eaves, as if to himself.

"Why, according to that," said Miss Lacey, in generous indignation, "who's safe?"

A day of close and tepid weather followed the storm. But it was on the evening of the next day after that—an evening of limpid sunshine and peace, the sparrows chirping shrilly in the narrow lights and shadows of the lane, that Mr. Sully came in to see Miss Lacey.

She was alone: and singing a little quiet tune to herself as she went about her business. He shook his head when she held up two glasses; and raised just one forefinger.

"He's dead," he said.

"Oh, no!" cried Miss Lacey.

"This morning . . . in his sleep." He gazed at her with an unusual—with a curiously fish-like concentration.

"Poor poor, gentleman," said Miss Lacey. He *was* a gentleman, too ; and no mistake. Never a hard word for nobody ; man, woman, or child. Always the same. But it's shocking. Well, well. But how dreadfully sudden, Mr. Sully, sir !"

"Well, I don't know," said Mr. Sully almost irritably. "And if so, where's the change ?" His round shoulders seemed with slight effort almost to shrug themselves.

"Goodness gracious," Miss Lacey cried, "you don't mean—you don't mean to think—you don't say it's true ? What he was telling us, Mr. Sully ?"

"I'm not so sure," her visitor replied vaguely, almost stubbornly. "Where else, after all, knowing all that, why, where else *could* he go ?"

"Mr. Eaves, Mr. Sully ? Him ? oh, no !"

Mr. Sully, in the intense clear quiet of the bar, continued to stare at her in a manner something like that of an over-glutted vulture. He nodded.

Miss Lacey's kind brown eyes suddenly darkened as if with a gust of storm. "But, then, what about us ?" she cried piteously, and yet with the tenderest generosity.

"Well," said Mr. Sully, opening the door, and looking out into the sunny evening air, "if you ask me, that's merely a question of time."

LISPET, LISPETT AND VAINÉ

M AUNDERS's little clear morning town was busy with dogs and tradesmen and carriages. It wore an almost child-like vivacity and brightness, as if overnight it had been swept and garnished for entranceable visitors from over the sea. And there—in the blowy sunshine, like some grotesque Staffordshire figure on a garret chimney-piece—there, at the street corner, sat so ludicrous an old man that one might almost have described him as mediæval.

A peak cap, of a slightly marine, appearance, was drawn down over his eyes. Beneath it, wisps of grey hair and a thin beard helplessly shook in the wind; and before him stood a kind of gaping wallet, of cracked American cloth, held yawningly open by its scissor-legs.

From this receptacle, ever and again, he extracted a strand of his dyed bast, or dubiously rummaged in its depths for his scissors. Whereupon he would gingerly draw the strand between his lips—a movement that positively set one's teeth on edge—and at the same moment he would cast a bleared, long, casual glance first down the street to his right—High Street; and then up the street to his left—Mortimer Street; as the bast drew him round.

I had watched him awhile from under the canvas window-blind of Lister Owlett's, the Curio Shop, in which my friend Maunders was chaffering with a dark sardonic-looking man over a piece of Sheffield plate, and, at last, with that peculiar mixture of shame, com-

passion, amusement, and horror which such ineffectual (though possibly not unhappy) beings produce on one, I had crossed the road and had purchased an absurd little doll bast marketing basket. Oddly, too, *after* I had actually selected my specimen, and had even paid its price, the queer remote old creature had insisted on my taking a rather more ornate example of his wares. . . .

"You know, Maunders," I said, when we were a hundred yards or so beyond the old gentleman's pitch, "this thing isn't at all badly made. The pattern is rather pretty, and there's a kind of useless finish to it. There's still something to be said for the amateur. Anyhow, Bettie will like it."

Maunders turned his long, large, palish face of his and looked at me with his extraordinary eyes. For the ninety-ninth time at least I noticed that their faint blue and his necktie's azure called each to each, as deep calls to deep.

"Amateur!" he echoed blandly, though a peculiar fixity of attention had gathered into his gaze; "why, that old gentleman is the last of—of the Lispets." He turned his head away—a queer-shaped, heavy head—and added: "Quite the last."

"Lispets, Maunders; what are they?"

"My dear K——, believe me," said Maunders almost mincingly, "not everything is a jest. You must now have trodden the streets of this small town at least a dozen times. The Works—what remains of them—are not seven miles off. And yet, here you are, pleasantly fluting that you have lived a life of such obscurity as never to have heard of Lispet, Lispeett,

and Vaine's. It's an affectation. I can scarcely forgive you. Nor will Henrietta."

He was—as usual—gently thrusting-out before him his handsome malacca cane in a manner which frequently persuaded approaching pedestrians that he was blind. And he repeated *sotto voce*, and as if out of an ocean of reflection, “‘Lispet, Lispett and Vaine ; Mercers to Their Majesties . . .’ I wish I could remember exactly how the old title went. In latter times, I mean.”

“Who were ‘their Majesties,’ then ?”

“‘Their Majesties’ ? ” said Maunders. “Oh, mere kings and queens. In the Firm’s heyday they were, of course, the crowned heads of practically the whole barbaric globe. But what is history—mummified fact; desiccated life ; the irretrievable. You are merely one of the crowd who care not tuppence for such things. The present generation—with its Stores and Emporiums and Trusts and ‘Combines’—is blind to the merest inkling of what the phrase Merchant Prince implies. We are not even conscious of irony in little Tommy Tucker’s *Nation of Shopkeepers*. Other times, better manners. The only ‘entirely honest merchant’ of late years—so far as I have definitely heard—is bones in Shirley graveyard. Still, the Lispet tradition was not one of mere honesty.”

“What, then,” said I.

“Well, in the first place,” replied Maunders, sliding me a remote ruminative glance, “it rambles back almost to prehistoric times. You may hunt down the aborigines of the Firm for yourself, if you feel so inclined. They appear to have been Phœnicians. Tyre,

maybe, but I gather non-Semitic. Some remote B.C. glasswork in the Egyptian galleries of the British Museum bears their 'mark'—two inverted V's with a kind of P between. There are others—a cone 'supported by' two doves ; a running hound, a crescent moon, and a hand—just a slim, ungrasping hand. Such marks have been discovered, they say, woven into mummy linen, into Syrian embroidery, Damascus silks, and tapestry from the Persian Gulf.

"The priestesses of Astaroth, according to Bateson, danced in gauze of L. L. and V.'s handiwork. They exploited the true bombyx ages before Ptolemy ; their gold thread gleamed on the Ark of the Covenant ; and it was fabric of their weaving in which the Queen of Sheba marvelled before Solomon. The shoes of his apes, sewn-in with seed pearls and splinters of amethyst were——. But what's the good of chattering on like this ? I'm not," groaned Maunders with a muffled yawn, "I'm not a perambulating encyclopædia. Some old pantaloons of a German, long before Bateson, burrowed in true German fashion into the firm's past. You may go to bed with his book, if you like—this very night. And then, of course, there are one or two of their old ledgers and curios in the local Museum. But I'm not an antiquarian. My only point is that the past even of a soapboiler is none the worse for being the distant past. What's more, they knew in those days that objects are only of value when representative of subjects. Has it never occurred to you (no, I suppose not) that the Wisest's apes, ivory, and peacocks were symbolical ? The apes representing, of course——"

"*Of course,*" I interrupted hurriedly. "But what I'm after, Maunders, is something faintly resembling matter-of-fact. These Lispet people—what is *really* their history? Subsequent, I mean, to the Apocrypha on which you have already drawn. Honestly, that pathetic old guy with the pouch of bast at the corner rather interested me."

"Drawn on!" he says," drawled Maunders. "When I have not even distantly referred to Joseph's Coat, or that she-devil Jezebel's headress, or to the Grand Khan, or to the Princess Assinimova, or to the tanned Barbary kid cuirass of steel and emeralds in which Saladin met his end. A Firm that, apart from clients celebrated in Holy Writ, once happily wrote off bad debts incurred with such customers as Semiramis, Sappho, Paris, and the Arch—or, as we amused moderns suppose, the exceedingly arch—Druuids, might well boast—though it didn't—not only of its repute but also of its catholicity.

"No, no"; he mooned slowly about him. "Your precious old 'matter-of-fact'! As if you were a clerk in unholy orders, as if you bought your boots in Scotland Yard, as if you were a huckster of hardware. By all means you shall have the facts. But for heaven's sake—for heaven's sake, precocious K_____, be careful with them. A friend of mine (an earnest man) was once given a fact, and it exploded—in his bathroom."

Dangling the last-of-the-Lispet's little basket on my forefinger, I awaited the facts.

"The point is," Maunders murmured on, "what of the slightest interest to you can there be to say of a

firm that is now dust, and that followed a tradition which in these days would within six months clap its partners into Bedlam or the Bankruptcy Court? You must confess that that kind of sweet reasonableness, hardly less than the modern variety, is at last death to any decent humanity. At long last, maybe. And how divine a decay! Anyhow, there they were—and there, too, are the ruins of them, edging the smooth sloping crest of Adderley Hill, on the other side of the town. Henrietta shall take you there tomorrow, if you're a polite guest. She loves to expatiate on that kind of rubble—the Failures.

"Still, try to imagine it, my dear K——, in its green and early days. A long range of low buildings, part half-timbered Tudor, with a few wombbed-in bits of 13th- and 14th-century work, and a fringe of excellent 18th-century—weathered and lovely moulded brick. In its prime it must have been a ravishing sight, with its hanging sign of faded blue and gold, its walls and thatch, and shingles, cobbled alleys and water-conduits, worn and mellow with the peace of a thousand thousand sunsets, the mosses and rain-stains and frost-flowerings of centuries of autumns and winters—just England's history, moral and actual, in antique stone and gable and mullion.

"That's as it may be. I have no wish to exaggerate. There is no particular virtue in mere age—except to the imagination. Still, your mere 'facts' are something I suppose. The fact that they were spinning silk—here in England—before the Conqueror came over. The fact that they were world-renowned glovers long before Elizabeth's time. The fact that their Egyptian

cotton must have been abob on the Mediterranean when Lancashire, please God, was a verdant solitude, and *your* forefathers, my poor dear, were gadding about in woad.

"They had their foreign agents, of course, netting in handiwork from all over the globe, on which they themselves set the final seal. I won't labour the point. All I suggest is that you should ask a Bond Street dealer to supply you with a Persian rug of L. L. and V. workmanship. But avoid the First of April for the enterprise. And yet, do you know, there was really nothing at the root of them but—well, a kind of instinct : to keep themselves clean. Animals share it. That, and the pride with which a single virtue darkens and suffocates a man if he isn't for ever toiling to keep its growth under. The one secret of their stability, of their being, and, in times past, of their success, was simply this—that nothing they should, would, or could ever conceivably offer for sale need disturb for a breath of a sob or the weight of a dewdrop the ashes of their sleeping forefathers in Adderley Church-yard. The like of which their forefathers had done by *their* forefathers.

"Why, if the ancient Hebrew Jews bequeath the very droop of their noses, why shouldn't an old English 'House' bequeath its tradition ? They believed—not Athanasian fashion but in their insides, so to speak—they believed in that perfect quality and consummate workmanship which, naturally, only exorbitant prices can assure. Exorbitant prices, mind you, not profits. They valued their fair fame. Only what was good enough for a Lispet could hope to satisfy a

partner who spelt his name with two t's, and only what satisfied a Lispett left unashamed the conscience of a Vaine.

"In plain Anglo-Saxon, the whole thing in decent practical moderation was merely the positive forecast of a Utopian dream. If ever you pass that way, rest for a moment at the mouth of the Well at the World's End. And drink, pretty creature. Perhaps you will discover a cone supported by two doves scrawled on the bottom of its bronze bucket."

"Perhaps," I echoed, as cheerfully as possible.

"At an extreme, of course, this tradition became the very devil. I don't say they made any claim to be gentry, or that they refused any kind of exalted alliance if nicely and unostentatiously proffered. There's an old tale of one of their apprentices who went sightseeing in the 14th century. Among other little romantic adventures, he hunted the Unicorn, got a siren with child, fought a demon in Babylon, and bartered tiaras with the reigning Pope in Avignon—very much at that precise moment at a loose end.

"Still a tale's only a tale, though none the worse for that. You want naked facts—a most indecorous variety; and one of them is that during the nearer centuries the three families riotously intermarried, making the green one red, as the poet says. They were self-sufficient—like Leonardo. Except, of course, that they were artists only in the sense that they designed and distributed objects of flawless craftsmanship; while he was a consummate craftsman only by degree of his supreme art. And that was—or was not—between himself and the infinite, so to speak."

"I love your 'so-to-speaks,' Maunders."

"It's very nice of you," said Maunders. "But what I really want to say is that gradually the 'standing' of the Firm lost everything in the nature of the precarious. Then, enter Beelzebub. Their only conceivable corruption could come from within, in one of two forms, putrefaction or petrifaction. Well, you shall see. In their earlier annals they can never so much as have tasted temptation to sink to trade devices. Progress, on the other hand, was practically denied to them. Their monopoly was the only one to be had for the asking—their integrity.

"I am not joking. Their wares were as innocent of guile and as beautiful as the lilies of the field. All they needed for mere prosperity was the *status quo*. Does Nature? The high and mighty sought them out for precisely the same reason as a young man with imagination pursues that Will-o'-the-Wisp called Beauty. Have you ever noticed how different a respect one has for an *advertised* article and for an article whose virtues have been sweetly absorbed into one's soul?

"Compare, for instance, a cottage loaf with *foie gras*; or the Mr. Anon of the Scottish Ballads with Sappho; or Lord Loveaduck's 'brilliance' with Gamma in Leo. Lispet, Lispett and Vaine would have as gladly catalogued their goods as have asked for references. Advertise! Why, a lady might as well advertise her great-grandmother's wig. They were merchants of the one true tradition. Their profits were fees. Their arrogance was beyond the imagination of a Tamburlaine, and their—what shall we call them?—their *principles* were as perennial as the secret

springs of the Oceans. It was on similar principles that Satan sold the fruit to Mother Eve."

"I see," said I. "If one *can*, Maunders—through a haze of contradictions."

"You cannot see," said Maunders. "But that is simply because your modern mind is vitiated by the conviction that you just *pay* a tradesman to sell you a decent article, that you can with money buy quality. You can't. L. L. and V. merely graciously *bestow'd* on their customers the excellence of their wares, of their 'goods' in the true old meaning of the term—a peculiar something in the style and finish which only the assurance of their history and their intentions—their ideals, if you like--made possible.

"Good heavens, man, isn't there a kind of divination between one's very soul and a thing decently made—whether it's a granite Rameses, or a Chelsea porringer? The mere look of a scarf or a snippet of damask or of lawn or of velvet, a stomacher or a glove of L. L. and V. make is like seeing for the first time a bush of blowing hawthorn or a nymph in a dell of woodruff, when, say, you are nine. Or, for the last, when you are nine-and-ninety."

"My dear Maunders," I smiled benignly. "What on earth are you talking about? I have always supposed that speech was intended to disclose one's meaning. Nymphs!"

"Well," replied Maunders, imperturbably shoving his "Sheffield" candlestick at last into his slate-covered greatcoat pocket; "I merely mean that there is a kind of goodness in good work. It confers a sort of everlasting youth. Think of the really swagger old

boys we call the masters. What do you actually get out of them ? The power to be momentarily immortal, that's all. But that's beside the point. What I wanted to tell you about—and you are a poor receptacle—is, of course, the firm's inevitable degradation. I have kept you pining too long. First they petrified, and then the stone began to rot away. The process must of course have been very gradual. It was Anthony Lispett who at the same time finished it off, and who yet—at least according to *my* notion of the thing, though Henrietta does not agree—and who yet redeemed the complete contraption.

"He must have come into the firm when he was a comparative youngster, say nineteen, towards the end of the 18th century. Needless to say, not a single one of the partners, not at least to my knowledge, ever went to a university or any fallallery of that kind. They held aloof from alien ideals. Their 'culture' was in their history and in their blood ; and not a Methuselah's lifetime could exhaust even a fraction of that. They had no ambitions ; did not mix ; kept to themselves. Their ladies made their own county society—sparrowhawk-nosed, sloping-shouldered, high-boned, fair-haired beauties for the most part. It was an honour to know them ; to be known by them ; a privilege—and one arrogantly reserved, to be among their 'customers.' They were Lispet, Lispett and Vaine.

"Well, this Anthony seems to have been something of an exotic leaven. From the beginning, he was two-thirds himself, *plus*, if you like, three thirds a Lispett. There is a portrait of him in his youth—an efflorescent Georgian dandy, whiskers, *bauteur*, eyebrows all com-

plete; a kind of antique Beau Brummel. No doubt the old boys squinted askew at him out of their spectacles, no doubt they nodded at each other about him over their port. No doubt their good ladies pursed their mouths at him over their teacups.

"But they could no more resist the insidious growth of the creature than Jack's mother could have held down the sprouting beanstalk. He was clearly the fruit of breeding-in, and of a kind of passive vain-gloriousness, as you will see when Henrietta exhibits the Family Tree.

"Old John Vaine Lispet Lispett had married his first cousin Jemima Lispett, and Anthony, it seems, was their only child. There is a story that old John himself in his youth had—well, gossip is merely gossip, and gossamer's merely gossamer, however prolific it may be. And, whether or not, there is no doubt that Anthony in his boyhood had made an attempt to run away. They picked him up seven miles from the coast—half-starved and practically shoeless. He must have been off to Tyre or Damascus, or something of that kind. One knows how one's worm may turn.

"Poorschild—just that one whiff of freedom, and he was back once more, gluing his nose, beating his fledgling plumes, against an upper window of the house on the hill. The whole thing, top to bottom, was a kind of slavery, of course. The firm had its own Factory Laws.

"No 'hand', for example was allowed to wear, at least within sight of those windows, any fabric not of the firm's weaving. No hand ever came into direct contact with one of the partners. There was a kind of

hereditary overseer—a family of the name of Watts. Every hand, again, was strictly forbidden to starve. If he or she misbecame himself or herself, instant dismissal followed ; and a generous pension.

“So drastic was the relation between the valley-village and the hill that for upwards of two hundred and fifty years, only one hand *had* so misbecome herself. She had smiled a little smile one Spring morning out of her little bottle-glass casement above her loom at the middle-aged Vaine ; and she drew her pension for six months ! They say she drowned herself in the Marshes. It is as if you went and hanged yourself for having too short a nose.”

“I cannot see the analogy,” said I.

“No,” said Maunders, “but your Maker would—the Jehovah that blessed the race of the vulture that sold me this old replica of a candlestick. Can’t you understand that her smile was a natural thing (just out of herself), and that he was a kind of sacrosanct old Pharaoh? The discipline was abominable according to our sentimental modern notions. But then, the perquisites were pretty generous.

“The long and the short of it was that every single one of the firm’s employees was happy. They were happy in the only sense one *can* be truly happy—in service. Corruptions have swarmed in now, but in the old days the village in the valley must have been as beautiful as a picture of this green old world hung up in the forecourt of Paradise.

“It had houses contemporary with every wing of the Works on the hill-top. Its wages were for the most part the only decent wages one can accept. They

were in *kind*. What, I ask you, in the sight of heaven is the fittest payment to John Keats for a sonnet—a Thousand Guineas or a plume of your little Elizabeth's golden fuzz ?

"I don't want to sentimentalize. J.K. had to live, I suppose (though why, we may be at loggerheads to explain). But what is porridge without cream, and what is cream if you loathe the cow ? I ask you, my dear K., is not a living wage simply one that will keep the *kind* of life it represents fully alive ?

"Give them the credit, then. L. L. and V. kept their hands positively blossoming with life. I don't mean they theorized. Marx is merely the boiled-up sentiment of a civilisation gone wrong. They weren't philanthropists. Nor am I, please heaven. The quality of the L. L. and V. merchandise ensured quality in their hands. Where we walk now—this macadamized road—was once a wood of birches and bluebells. Can you even imagine its former phantom denizens to have been knocked-kneed or under-hung ?"

"Perhaps not," said I, "but are you intending to imply that the 'phantom denizens,' as you call them, manufacture the bluebells ?"

Maunders made an indescribably guttural noise in his throat.

"What I am saying," he replied, "is that the village was as lovely a thing to see and live and laugh and love and dream in as were the bodies of the human beings that occupied it. Their stock, too, had climbed from grace to grace. They enjoyed a recognizable type of beauty. The girls were as fair-skinned as a plucking of apricots, with hair of a spidery fine silk-

eness, and eyes worthy of their veiling. Just Nature's mimicry, I suppose ; like an Amazonian butterfly, or the praying mantis or—or the stick caterpillar.

"I can see them—and so could you, if you had the eyes—I can see them dancing in the first of early moonlight, or bathing in what, prior to the human spawning of tin cans and old boots, was a stream crystal as Pharpar. I can see them sallying out and returning on their chattering to-and-fro in the morning dews and the greying twilight. No set hours ; only a day as long or as short as love of its task could make it. What indeed is breeding, r.y dear K., but the showing forth of a perfectly apt and peculiar excellency ? Just fitness for its job. Puma, pelican, Patagonian papalja, pretty Poll."

"What is a papalja, Maunders?" I inquired.

"I don't know," said Maunders. "But imagine them—with whatever effort is necessary—ascending and descending that hill-side through their Fruit Walk ! It is about the nearest approach to any earthly vision I can achieve of Jacob's ladder. Give even your abominable old London a predominant L.L. & V.—well, *then*, but not till then, you may invite me to the Mansion House for its annual November 9th. But there, I'm not an iconoclast."

"I wish, Maunders," said I, "you would at your leisure re-read *Unto this Last* ; and that you would first make the ghost of an attempt to tell a decent story. What was the Fruit Walk?"

The Town's puddley, petrol-perfumed, outlying streets were still busy with pedestrians—nurses and perambulators, children in woollen gaiters, and young

ladies with red hair. It was, therefore, almost as difficult to keep abreast with Maunders as it was to follow his obscure meanderings.

"Oh, the Fruit Walk," he muttered, staring vacantly through a dairyman's window at an earthenware green-and-grey pelican with a fish in its bill. "The Fruit Walk was merely the cherries and quinces and crab-apples and damsons that had been planted in rosy, snowy, interlacing, discontinuous quincunx fashion; half circling and straggling over and down the green mounting and mounded hill to the very edge of the quarry. Not a miserable avenue, of course, but a kind of to-and-fro circuitous chace between village and Works. Once, your eyes might actually have seen that divine chimneyed cluster, tranquil as an image in water, on the dark emerald hill-top in the dying, gaudy sunset. And, shelving down, that walk in bloom! One might almost assume that L. L. & V. weather habitually haunted the scene. Things do react on one another, you know; and Nature wears 14th century sleeves."

"Oh, for pity's sake, Maunders, let's get back to Anthony. What about Anthony?"

Maunders, softly striding along like an elephant in his flat square-toed shoes, appeared to be pondering.

"Well," he began slowly, "the 'what-about' of Anthony covers a rather wide field. I fancy, do you know, there was a tinge of Traherne in his composition. The beau was only the chrysalis stage. Of course it was Blake's era. I fancy Anthony sowed pretty early his wild oats. There are many varieties, and his were mainly of the mind."

"He was not, I venture to add, to make things quite clear to you, either a marrying or an un-marrying man. And, of course, like all instinctive creatures with a never-waning fountain of life in them, he shed. Some of us shed feathers, some fur, some innocence, some principles, and all shed skin—the seven year's Spring-cleaning, you know, that leaves the house in the flooding May-day sunlight a little bit dingier than it was before.

"Well, Anthony seems to have shed what one mistakes for artificialities. He shed his ringlets, his fopish clothes, his pretences of *lang'or*, his dreamy superiority. He shed his tacit acceptance of the firm's renown, and so discovered his own imagination. Only in the 'tip-toppers' do intellect and imagination lie down together, as will the lion and the lamb.

"Then, of course, he seems gradually or suddenly to have shed the L. L. & V. pride and arrogance. He must have begun to think. All these centuries, please remember, the firm had been gradually realising why, actually *why*, their stuff was super-excellent in the eyes of humanity. And that—Oh, I don't know ; but to realise that, perhaps, is to discount its merits elsewhere. Anthony, on the other hand, had come to realise, in his own queer vague fashion, that one's only salvation is to set such eyes squinting. And yet, not of set and deliberate purpose. He was not a wit. Art, my dear, dear K., whatever you may like to say, is useless ; unless one has the gumption to dissociate use from materialism."

"I was not aware," said I, "that I had said anything. You mean, I suppose, that a man has only to realise

that his work is excellent for it to begin to lose its virtue. Like beauty, Maunders, and the rouge-pot and powder-puff? Still, I prefer Anthony to trade ethics. What did the rest of them do?"

"What I was about to tell you," replied Maunders mildly, "is, that Anthony had bats in his belfry. Not the vampire variety; just *extra-terrestrial* bats. He was 'queer.' Perhaps more in him than in most of us had come from elsewhere. And the older he grew the more the hook-winged creatures multiplied. No doubt the Firm would have edged him out if it had been practicable. No doubt the young hedge-sparrows would edge out the squab-cuckoo, if that were manageable. But it was not. Anthony was double-dyed, a Lispe tt with two t's, and it would have been *lèse majesté*, domestic high-treason to acknowledge to the world at large that he was even eccentric.

"Well, there he was, a smallish man, with short-growing hair, a little like Thothmes II., to judge from his portrait—a man of extraordinary gifts in his craft, of an exquisite sensibility to quality and design, but seldom, I imagine, at the Board Meetings. Often, it seems, he used to ramble off into the country. He appears to have especially hated a sort of Frenchiness that had crept into the firms' wares. But much worse than mooning about to soak in Englishness again, he would ramble off into the country of his *mind*, and there you need to have a faint notion of where you are before you can safely go any further. It's difficult, of course, to know exactly what his broodings were. But the story goes that he would complete his nocturnal pilgrimages by climbing up

before daybreak into one of the fruit-trees on the hill, a magnificent mulberry—to see the sun, I suppose ; to ‘look down’ as far as possible on the Works ; to be up among the morning birds, like the old man in the limerick.”

“An odd bat, that,” I interposed.

“There he would squat,” continued Maunders imperturbably, “poor old creature, peering out of the leaves, the rose of dawn on his face, as when it lightened Blake’s. And presently, the angels up from the valley would pass by, singing and laughing, to their work. A pretty sight it must have been, with their young faces and pure colours and nimble practised gestures. For, mind you, it was still a happiness to be one of the hands in the firm—as compared, at any rate, with being a grimy paw elsewhere. Only at long last would *they* become aware of the glowing gloom in the heads. Not merely were the brains of the firm tending in one direction and the members remaining more or less static in another, but things outside were beginning to change. The god of machinery was soon to spout smoke and steam from his dismal nostrils, and man to learn the bright little lesson that not only necessities, but even luxuries, can be the cheaper if they are manufactured a gross at a time.”

“Yes,” said I ; “there he would squat ; and then ?”

“Then,” breathed Maunders, “one morning, one shafted scarlet morning, it seems he saw—well, I cannot say what exactly he did see. No hand anyhow, but a light-embodied dream. A being lovelier than any goddess for whom even an L. L. & V. in the ser-

vice of the Sorceress of Sidon could have been moved from bowels of superstitious horror to design sandals. A shape, a fleetingness, a visitant—poor old Bat-in-the-Belfry—evoked by a moment's aspiration and delight out of his own sublime wool-gatherings. And so this ageing creature, this extra-Lispotted old day-dreamer, fell in love—with a non-entity.”

“My dear Maunders ; pause,” I said. “In mere self-respect ! How could such an occurrance as that have been recorded in the Firm’s annals ? No ; no.”

“Weren’t there letters ?” sighed Maunders, turning suddenly on me, malacca cane in air. “Wasn’t there a crack-brained diary ? Haven’t you a vestige of old-fashined and discredited gumption ? Wait till I have finished, and let your sweet-smelling facts have a show. Ask Henrietta. I say,” he repeated stubbornly, “that between the dawn and the daytime, down out of his broad foliage, the hill-side in indescribable bloom, this old meandering Query, this half-demented old Jack-o’-Dreams saw a Vision, and his heart went the same way as long since had gone his head. Haven’t I told you he was what the dear old evolutionists, blind to the inexhaustible graces of creation, esteem a *sport* ?”

“The Family Tree had blossomed out of season, for the last time, jetting its dwindling virtue into this final, queer, anomalous bloom ; rich with nectarous bane. It had returned upon itself. ’Tis the last rose of Summer that sighs of the Spring. ‘Ah, yes, but did the vision see *him* ?’—you are sneering to yourself.

“And to that I reply : I don’t know. Do they ever ? Or is it that only certain long-suffering eyes can afford

them the hospitality of becoming visible? Anyhow, I see her. And in a fashion that is not only the bliss but the very deuce of solitude. Ignore its bidding, K., and we are damned. Oh yes, I know. The inward eye is all very well. I know it. But to share that experience with these outward groping orbs, I'd—well, I'd gladly go bankrupt. Ask Henrietta."

"What happened then?"

"This happened. The wool-gathering wits flocked back and golden-fleeced him. One might almost say he became equally astute and extravagant. As a matter of fact, of course, only willing and selfless service can bring everyhuman faculty to bear." Maunders sighed. "He sent a cheque for a thousand guineas or so to a Dutch bulb-farm, and planted the hill-walk with tulips, April-blue scyllas and *narcissi poetici*. *Narcissi poetici*! He tapped an earth-bound spring and set up fauns and dryards, amoretti and what not, spouting subterranean water. He built a shrine of alabaster—with an empty niche.

"It appeared to be mere scatter-brained fooling. Still, it was in a sense in the L. L. & V. tradition, and his partners appear to have let him have a free hand. Don't forget their even then almost illimitable resources. They'd far far rather—even the strict-whiskered Vaine of the period, who in unhappier circumstances might have sat for the typical alderman—they'd infinitely rather he exhibited his peculiarities within their sphere, so to speak, than bring them to mockery before the world at large."

"I see."

"They hadn't till then perhaps baldly recognised

the world at large, except as a hot-bed of prehistoric or sycophantic customers. And they never—not for an instant—even surmised his depredations would prove active from *within*. None the less, like some secret serpent, spawn of the forgotten fabulous, he was in fact gnawing at the very vitals of the tradition. Let me put it bluntly, in terms which even you, my dear K., will appreciate. Anthony Lispett had 'gone balmy' on his Vision. She—and therefore he—was 'beside himself.'

"I do not suggest that he mixed her up with his superannuating old *corpus vile*; nothing vulgar to talk of, and tragic to think of, in that sort. He merely lived on from that daybreak dream to dream with but one desire in his poor cracked old cranium—to serve her idea. Aren't we, all of us, myth-makers? Grins not the Lion at the Unicorn? Does not the soapboiler bedizen our streets with Art—and 'atmosphere'? Anthony's myth was from elsewhere—neither from his stomach, his pocket, his reputation, his utilitarian morals, nor his brains. That was all. And as he served her, I suppose, he found himself cherubically treading yet more secretly and inwardly her hesperidean meads."

I glanced at Maunders in some dismay. "How?"

"Well," said he, "it is not easy to divine how exactly Anthony began his malpractices. But clearly, since he was perpetually haunted by this illusion of a divine, unearthly stranger, a sort of Athene haunting his hill, his one desire could not but be to set the Works working for *her*. He could bide his time. He could be quiet and gradual. Anyhow, we know the

event, though we can't say precisely how it evolved.

"One may assume, I suppose, that he would steal to and fro among the nocturnal looms and presses and vats and dyeing rooms, and, ten times more richly gifted by his insane inspiration than he was even by nature, that he just doctored right and left. He would experiment night after night with the firm's materials in the raw. Worse, he rationed himself in his tree-gazing ; and climbed to his leafy perch only during certain conjunctions of the planets. Mere circumstances seem to have waited on him, as did the sun on Joshua.

"But the Lispet and the Vaine of this time were nothing but hidebound old bachelors—intent only on saving the face of convention. The last Double-T died the day after the site of the shrine was decided on. There was no young blood in the firm. And with an almost diabolical ingenuity Anthony seems to have executed only the orders of such clients as wanted the firm's very finest and rarest handiwork. Even those, of course, who coveted or could afford only the commoner materials were already beginning to dwindle in numbers.

"The other customers he kept waiting, or insulted with questions, or supplied with more delicate and exquisite fabrics than they required.

"The story goes that a certain Empress renowned for her domestic virtues commanded a trousseau for yet another royal niece or what not. A day or two before the young woman's nuptials, and weeks late, arrived silks and tissues and filigrees spun out of some kind of South American and Borneo spider

silk, such as only a nymph could wear. My dear K., it nearly hatched a European War. That particular Court was little but a menagerie of satyrs.

“Countesses and such-like soliciting ‘fives’ and ‘fours’ in gloves, and ‘ones’ in stockings, might still faintly hope to be accommodated; and even then their coveted wares were a tight fit. For a while the firm seems to have survived on the proceeds from merchandise intended for grown-ups which your cosmopolitan Croesus snapp'd up for their children. At second-hand, of course, since few of them could extort a ‘reference’ to the firm for love or even for money.

“Henrietta has a few bits of embroideries and silk of the time. Perhaps she will show them to you. Even a human craft can reflect a divine disaster. And the linens!—of a quality that would derange the ghost of an Egyptian embalmer.

“Even worse, Anthony seems to have indulged an extraordinary sense of propriety. He would lavish L. L. & V. urbanities on some sylph of an actress who had no more morals in the usual acceptation of the term than a humming bird, and flatly returned fabulous cheques (with the order) to old protégés of the firm merely convicted of fortune-making, or of organised ‘philanthropy’, or of ‘bettering the conditions’ of their fellow-creatures. He seems to have hated the virtuous for their own sake alone.

“In short, he grew madder and madder, and the custom, the good-will, even the reputation of the firm melted like butter in the sun. The last Lispet followed the last Double-T—expired of apoplexy in

the counting-house, and was sat on by the coroner. The reigning Vaine turned religious and was buried in a sarcophagus of Portland stone under the foundations of the Unitarian Chapel which he himself had laid in the hope perhaps to lay the L. L. & V. devil at the same time.

"The hands dwindled, died out, dropped away, or even emigrated to the paws. Only a few with some little competence and an impulsive fund of gratitude and courtesy worked on for a master of whom because they loved him, they asked the paltriest wages. The Fruit Walk mutined into a thicket ; the fountains choked themselves with sighing and greened with moss ; the tulips found a quieter Nirvana in mere leaf. And Anthony made at last no pretence, even of patronising the final perishing flower of the firm's old clientele.

"He trafficked in a kind of ludicrous dolls' merchandize—utterly beautiful little infinitesimals in fabrics worth a hundred times their weight in rubies. So ridiculous a scandal had the 'business' at last become that when its few scoffing creditors for old sake's sake sold it up, not a single bid was made for the property. It is in ruins now. Consult Ezekiel. Or Henrietta.

"I have no wish to sentimentalize ; I am not a cynic or a philosopher. Yet I slide my eyes back to that narrow hilled-in strip of sea-coast whence once rose walled Tyre and Sidon, Arvard and Jebail, and—well, I merely remind myself that the Rosetta Stone is but a hornbook of the day before yesterday's children of men. Things *do* as a matter of fact seem to rot

of their own virtue—inverted, so to speak. It's not likely to occur again. I mean, not for some time. The Town was almost apologetic. Democracy rarely runs to extremes—unless one may so describe the guillotine. But I am no politician. Enough of that. Even transatlantic visitors are now rare."

Maunders and I were standing together by this time under the laurels and bay-trees, not of his own planting, besides his garden railings ; he with his bulging, pale-blue eyes—and his sham candlestick branching out of his pocket ; and I—well, irritated beyond endurance.

"Good heavens, Maunders," I exclaimed, "the stuff you talk ! But one would not mind that so much if you could spin a decent yarn. You haven't even told me what became of the Belfry. Was he *nothing* but bats at last ?"

"Old Anthony ?" he murmured softly. "Why, there is nothing in that. He lived on—for years—in the Works. You could see his burning candle from the valley, even on nights of full moon. And, of course, some gay imbecile set the story about that the whole lovely abandoned derelict place was haunted. Twanging strings and vanishing faces, and a musing shape at a remoter window, her eyes reflecting a scene which only an imagination absolutely denuded of commonsense could hope or desire to share with her. After all, one does ignore the ghost until it is well out of the body. Ask Henrietta."

"But, Maunders," I called after him.

Too late : his shapeless slouching slate-grey body with its indescribable hat and malacca cane had

vanished among the 'evergreens', and the only answer I received was the dwindling rumour of my own expostulatory voice among their leaves—“Maunders . . .”

Strange to say, it was in this moment of helplessness that I discovered that my little bast basket was gone. When? How? For an instant I hesitated—in pure cowardice. It was a quarter past one, and Mrs. Maunders, a charming and active hostess, if a little of a martinet, disapproved of unpunctual guests. But only for an instant. The thought of Bettie's fair glad little face decided me; and I set o't to retrace my footsteps in search of the lost plaything. Alas, in vain.

THE TREE

ENCASED in his dingy first-class railway carriage, the prosperous Fruit Merchant sat alone. From the collar of his thick frieze greatcoat stuck out a triangular nose. On either side of it a small, bleak, black eye gazed absently at one of the buttons on the empty blue-upholstered seat opposite to him. His breath spread a fading vapour in the air. He sat bolt upright, congealed in body, heated in mind, his unseeing eye fixed on that cloth button, that stud.

There was nothing else to look at, for his six narrow glass windows were whitely sheeted with hoar-frost. Only his thoughts were his company, while the coach, the superannuated coach, bumped dully on over the metals. And his thoughts were neither a satisfaction nor a pleasure. His square hard head under his square hard hat was nothing but a pot seething with vexation, scorn, and discontent.

What had invited him out so far, in weather so dismal, on a line so feebly patronised? Anger all but sparkled in his mind as he considered the intention of his journey, and what was likely to be the end and outcome of it. Twelve solid yet fleeting years divided him from his last encounter with his half-brother—twelve *cent.* *per cent.* years—shipload on shipload of exotic oranges and lemons, pineapples, figs, and blushing pomegranates. At this very moment three more or less seaworthy ocean tramps were steaming across the watery channels of the world laden with cargoes of which he was the principal consignee. He stretched out his legs,

crossed his feet. He was a substantial man. There was nothing fantastic about *him*.

To put on airs when you couldn't afford them ; to meet a friendly offer with rank ingratitude ; to quarrel with the only relative on earth who had kept you out of the workhouse—he had sworn never to set foot in the place again. Yet—here he was : and nothing but a fool for his pains. Having washed his hands of the whole silly business, he should have kept them washed. Instead of which he thrust them deeper into his capacious pockets and wondered to heaven when his journey was to come to an end.

No, it was with no charitable, no friendly, no sentimental motive that he was being glided joltingly on. A half-brother—and particularly if he owes you a hundred pounds and more—need not be even fractionally a being one smiles to think of for the sake of *auld lang syne*. There was nothing in common between the two of them, except a father now twenty-five years in his grave and a loan that would never be repaid.

That was one galling feature of the situation. There was another. In plain print and in his own respectable morning newspaper the Fruit Merchant had chanced but a week or two ago on the preposterous fact that a mere woodcut of a mere "Bird and Flower," initialled P. P., had fetched at Christie's ninety-seven guineas. Ninety-seven guineas : sixty-eight crates of excellent Denia oranges at thirty shillings a crate. What the devil ! His small eyes seemed to congest and yet at the same time to protrude from their sockets.

"P. P."!—perfect pest; paltry poser; plaguey parasite. And yet—hardly a parasite. You couldn't with a term like that dish a half-brother who hadn't sent you a single word of greeting for twelve solid fleeting prosperous years. Even if he did owe you a hundred pounds. Even if he hadn't the faintest wish to remind you of the fact. Not that the Fruit Merchant *wanted* his hundred pounds. He wasn't a debt collector. He wasn't even vindictive. It was the principle of the thing.

For if half-an-hour's silly scratching over a little lump of wood could fetch you £101 17s., about twenty-nine-and a half minutes would bring in a round hundred. And there were more birds and more flowers in that infernal tree than Noah could have found room for in his Ark. The tree!—the very thought of it swept a pulsating cloud of rage over the Fruit Merchant's eyes. Cool, quiet insolence—he could have forgiven that, and could almost have forgotten it. But the faintest recollection of the tree, and of the talk under it, never failed to infuriate him. It infuriated him now almost beyond endurance, simply because he knew, in the secrecy of his thoughts, that *this* was the decoy which was dragging him on these fifty-three interminable miles on a freezing hideous country afternoon.

The tree: never in all his life had he met with such an exhibition of sheer, stark, midsummer madness. And yet with every inch of his journey the recollection grew on him. He couldn't get it out of his head. Curiosity, resentment, vindictiveness, a cold creeping cunning—a score of conflicting emotions zigzagged

to and fro in his mind. He glared through them at the walls of his cage. But worst outrage of all was the creeping realisation—and his body stiffened at the thought—that he was even now, and perhaps even a little more than ever, afraid of the tree. When you finally deal with a relative and a bloodsucker who has been a pest to you all your life, the one thing you do not look for is an interference of that kind.

He could not deny it, the tree had impressed him. Ever since that first swimming stare at it, the moment he thought of his brother, of the country, even of his boyhood—there it was. It had impressed him so much that the upholstered button had now completely disappeared, and he seemed to be actually in the presence of it again. He saw it as vividly as if its image hung there before his very eyes in the slightly self-warmed air of his solitary compartment. The experience filled him with so sudden a flood of aversion and resentment that the voice of the guard chaunting the name of his destination reached him only just in time to set him frantically pulling down his frozen window and ejecting himself out of the train.

One hasty glance around him showed that he was the sole traveller to alight on the frosted timbers of the obscure little station. A faint rosiness in the west foretold the decline of the still wintry day. The firs that flanked the dreary passenger-shed of the platform stood burdened already with the blackness of coming night.

He was elderly, he was obese, his heart was none too sound, at least as compared with his head. Yet if

he intended to catch the last train home, he had scarcely a couple of hours in which to reach his half-brother's wretched little house, to congratulate him on his guineas, to refuse to accept repayment of his loan, to sneer at his tree, and to return to the station.

A bark at a weedy young porter in mittens, with mouth ajar over his long teeth, sent him ambling off for a conveyance. The Fruit Merchant stood under the shed in his frieze coat and square hard hat and watched the train glide out of the station. The screech of its engine, horning up into the windless air, had exactly expressed his own peculiar sentiments.

There was not a living being in sight whereon to breathe a curse. Only himself, a self he had been vaguely cursing throughout his tedious journey. The frozen landscape lay white in the dying day. The sun hung like the yolk of an egg above the still horizon. Some menace in the very look of this sullen object hinted that P. P. might long since have crossed the bourne from which no belated draft on any earthly bank had ever been known to transpire.

The thought diverted into ruggeder channels the current of the talk which he had intended to engage in with his half-brother. In other words, he would give the silly fool a bit of his mind. The fact was, their last quarrel—if anything so one-sided could be called a quarrel—had tinctured the Fruit Merchant's outlook on the world a good deal more densely than he would until now have confessed. A frown settled above the sullen eyes.

No living creature, no sound stirred the air. The fair country lay cold as if in a swoon. Like a shallow

inverted saucer a becalmed sky curved itself over the unbroken quiet of the fields. His broad cleft chin thrust into his muffler, his hands into his capacious pockets, the stranger to these parts stood waiting, just stood there, with his small black eyes staring desolately out of his clothes. Why, you might just as well be marooned in a foreign land, or on a stage—sinister, cold, vacant, and not a single soul in the audience. At the sound of wheels and hoofs he coughed as if in uncontrollable indignation ; and turned smartly on his heels. . . .

With a gesture of disdain the Fruit Merchant sourly thrust a shilling into the weedy porter's immensely knuckled hand and mounted into the cab. At his onset the whole square fusty interior leaned towards him like an extinguisher over the stub of a candle. The vehicle disgraced the universe. Even the man on the box resembled some little cautious and obscure animal that had been dug up out of the earth. When given his direction his face had fallen into an indescribable expression beneath its whiskers : an expression, it appeared, which was its nearest approach to a smile.

“And don’t spare your—horse,” had barked his fare, slamming the rickety door behind him.

A railway carriage even of the most antique description, when its glass is opaque with rime, is a little less like a prison cell than a four-wheeled cab. For which reason, perhaps, as the vehicle ground on beneath the misty leafless elms, the frigid air was allowed to beat softly in from the open window upon its occupant’s slightly impurpled face.

And still on and on, now here, now there, memory retrieved for the sombre shape within it every incident of his last experience on this self-same road. It had been summertime—June. He had been twelve years younger, a good gross of years less prosperous, and not perhaps quite so easily fanned into a peculiar helpless state of rage.

Indeed, his actual meeting with his half-brother at the little white garden gate had been almost friendly. So friendly that it would hardly have been supposed they were in any way unpleasingly related to one another, or that the least responsibility of each to each could have caused any kind of festering recrimination. Not that P. P. was even then the kind of person one hastens to introduce to one's friends. You not only never knew how he would look or what he would say. You weren't even certain what he might do. A rolling stone that merely fails to gather moss is a harmless object by comparison with one that appears to gather momentum. And even the most trifling suggestion, not so much of eccentricity as of an alien and crooked gleam in the eye, is apt to make the most respectable company a little uneasy.

Not that the two half-brothers had ever discussed together their aims and intentions and ideas about life; their desires or motives or hopes, or aversions or apprehensions or prejudices. The Fruit Merchant had his fair share of most of these human incentives, but he also had principles, and one of them was to keep his mouth shut.

They had met, had shaken hands, had exchanged

remarks on the weather. Then P. P., in his frayed jacket and slippers, with his meagre expressionless face, had aimlessly led off his visitor into the garden, had aimlessly dropped a few distant remarks about their common past; and then, surrounded as they were by the scenery, scents, and noises of summer, had pushed his knotted hands into his trousers pockets, and fallen silent; his grey, vacant eyes fixed on the tree. The Fruit Merchant had tried in vain to break the silence, to shrug his way out of it. He also could only stand and stare up and up—at the tree.

Solitary, unchallenged, exotic in its station all but at the foot of the broken-hedged, straggling garden, it rose to heaven, a prodigious spreading ascendant cone, with its long, dark, green, pointed leaves. It stood, from first springing branch to apex, a motionless and somnolent fountain of flowers.

If his half-brother had taken the Fruit Merchant into a dingy little greenhouse and had shown him an ailing plant that with care, water, and guano had been raised from some far-fetched seed—well, that might have been something to boast about. He himself was in the trade. He knew a Jaffa orange from a mandarin. The stuff has to *grow*, of course; and he was broad-minded enough to approve of rural enterprise. Giant Mangolds and Prize Pumpkins—they did no harm. They encouraged the human vegetable. But the . . .

At last he had come to his senses and had peered fretfully about him. The garden was a waste, the hedges untrimmed, a rank lusty growth of weeds flaunted their flowers at the sun. And this tree—

it must have been flourishing here for centuries past, a positive eyesore to any practical gardener. P. P. couldn't even put a name to it. Yet by the fixed idiotic dreamy look on his face you might have supposed it was a gift from heaven ; that, having waved his hands about like those coloured humbugs with the mango, the thing had sprung up by sheer magic out of the ground.

Not that the Fruit Merchant had denied that it was unique. He had never seen, nor would he ever want to see, its double. The sun had beaten down upon his head ; a low, enormous drone filled the air ; the reflected light dazed his eyes. A momentary faintness had stolen over him as he had turned once more and glanced again into his half-brother's long bony face—the absent eyes, the prominent cheek, the greying hair dappled with sunlight.

"How do you *know* it's unique ?" he had asked. "It may be as common as blackberries in other parts of the country—or abroad. One of the officers on the *Catamaran* was telling me"

"I don't know," his half-brother had interrupted him, "but I have been looking at trees all my life. This resembles all, reminds me of none. Besides, I'm not going abroad—at least for the present."

What had he meant by that ? The Fruit Merchant hadn't inquired ; had merely stood there in the flowers and grasses, blinking up once more into the spreading branches, almost involuntarily shaking his head at the pungent sweetness that hung dense and sickly in the air. And the old familiar symptoms began to stir in him, as he now sat jolting on in his cab—symptoms

which his intimates would have described in one word : fuming.

He was not denying it, not he—the tree had been remarkable as trees go. For one thing, it bore two distinct kinds and shapes of blossom. The one circular and full and milky in a dark cuplike calyx, with clusters of scarlet-tipped pistils ; the other a pale yellow oval, three-petalled, with a central splash of orange. He had surreptitiously squeezed a couple of the fallen flowers into his pocket-book, had taken them out at his office in the Borough the next morning to show them to the partner he had afterwards advantageously bought out of the business, only to find them black, slimy, and unrecognisable, and to be laughed at for his pains.

"What's the use of the thing?" he had next inquired of his half-brother in a gross voice. "Is it edible?" At which, with the faint smile on his face that had infuriated the Fruit Merchant even as a boy, the other had merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not try it on the pigs?"

"I don't keep pigs."

Keep pigs, indeed ; there wasn't the faintest symptom that he would ever be able to keep himself !

"Well, aren't there any birds in these parts?" It had been a singularly false move.

"It has brought its own," had been his half-brother's muttered retort.

There was no denying it—at least so far as the Fruit Merchant's small ornithological knowledge went. At that very moment birds of a peculiarly vivid green sheeniness were hovering and dipping

between the deep blue of the sky and the mountainous blossoming. Little birds, with unusually long and attenuated bills, playing, fluttering, lisping, courting, and apparently sucking the heady nectar from the snowy and ivory cups, while poised like animate gems on the wing. He had again opened his mouth, but his half-brother had laid a lean tingling hand on his sleeve. "Listen!" he said.

Half-stifled, jetting, delirious bursts of song twinkled, belled, rose, eddied, overflowed from the tented depths of the tree, like the yells and laughter of a playground of children suddenly released for an unexpected half-holiday. Listen, indeed! The noise of the creatures was still echoing in his ears as he sat there bulkily swaying, his eyes fixed on the pallid, gliding hedgerow from his fusty cab.

P. P. had not positively claimed that every single chorister in the chorus was an exotic visitant. He had gone further. He had gently bent down a low-lying fan of leaves and bloom, and not content with exhibiting one by one living specimens of a little spotted blue iridescent beetle, a horned kind of cockchafer, and a dappled black-and-yellow-mottled ladybird—all of them following their lives in these surroundings; he had also waved a lean hand in the direction of a couple of gaudy butterflies intertwining in flight down the slope of the garden, had pointed out little clumps of saffron and sky-blue flowers, and a rank, ungainly weed with a cluster of black helmet-shaped florets at its tips, asserting that they were as rare—as unprecedented—in those parts as the tree itself.

"You don't mean to say because the thing's brought its own vermin that it's any the better for that? Lord, we can do that in the fruit trade."

"It's brought me," said the other, mooning meanwhile in the opposite direction.

"And where do you raise your pertatoes and artichokes and scarlet runners? It looks to me like a dam waste of soil."

The wandering greenish-grey eyes had rested for a moment on the puffy contemptuous face a few inches beneath them without the faintest symptom of intelligence. Empty eyes, yet with a hint of danger in them, like a bright green pool of water in a derelict quarry. "You shall have a basket of the fruit; if you'll risk it. It never really ripens—queer-looking seeds."

"You eat it yourself, then?"

The eyes slid away, the narrow shoulders had lifted a little. "I take things as they come." It was precisely how he had afterwards taken the cheque.

Seated there, on either side of the deal table, in the bare, uncarpeted, uncurtained living-room of the cottage over a luncheon of bread and dry cheese and onions, with the reflected light of the tree on his half-brother's face, the talk between the two of them had gradually degenerated into an altercation.

At length the Fruit Merchant, with some little relief, had completely lost his temper. A half empty jam-pot buzzing with bees was no more appetising an object because the insects were not of the usual variety. He had literally been stung into repeating a few semi-fraternal truths.

To submit to being half-starved simply because nobody with money to waste would so much as look at your bits of drawings ; to sit there dreamily grinning at a tree in your back-garden, twenty times more useless because there wasn't its like for miles around, even *if* there wasn't ; to be content to hang like a bloodsucker on the generosity of a relative half-blood and half-water—well, he had given P. P. a bit of his mind.

The Fruit Merchant instinctively drew a cold fat hand down his face as a more and more precise recollection of the subsequent scene recurred to him. Mere silence can be insulting, and there was one thing about his half-brother—worse than all the rest of his peculiarities put together—that had never failed to reduce him to a feverish helplessness : his eyes. They didn't see you even when they were fixed on you across a couple of feet of deal board. They saw something else ; and with no vestige of common courtesy.

And those hands—you could swear at a glance that they had never done a single honest day's work in their owner's lifetime. Every sight of them had made it easier for the Fruit Merchant to work himself up into a blind refreshing rage. The cottage had fairly shaken to his abuse. The raw onions had danced under his fist on the table. And twining in and out between his roarings and shoutings had meandered on that other low, groping, dispassionate voice—his brother's,

He had found his own place ; and there he intended to remain. Rather than sit on a stool in a counting-

house writing invoices for crates of oranges and pineapples he would hang himself from the topmost branches of the tree. You had your own life to lead, and it didn't matter if you died of it. He was not making any claims. There was nothing the same in this world for any two individuals. And the more different everything was, the more closely you should cling to the difference.

Oh, yes, he had gone on, it was mere chance, or whatever you liked to call it, that had brought him here ; a mere chance that the tree had not even been charged for in the rent. Here it was, and it would last him his lifetime ; and, when that was over, he wouldn't complain. He had wagged his skimpy beard, a pencil between his fingers. No, he wouldn't complain if they just dug a hole in the garden and shovelled his body in under the grass within reach of the rootlets. What's your body ?—“They'll buy me all right when I'm safely dead. Try it—it's a fair speculation.”

“Try what ?” The Fruit Merchant's countenance had suddenly set like a gargoyle in cast-iron.

His half-brother had nodded towards a dingy portfolio that stood leaning against a half-empty bookcase. And at that his guest had laid about him with a will. “So that's the kind of profit you are hoping to make out of your blighted old bee-bush ? That's your profit ? That's your fine airs—your miserable scribblings and scragglings.”

He had once more slammed down his fat fist on the table and delivered his ultimatum. “See here, I give you a hundred pounds, here and now. There's no claim on me, not a shred. We don't even share

the same mother, even if we share the same dad. You talk this abject rubbish to me. You have never earned a decent penny in your life. You never will. You are a fool and a loafer. Go to the Parish ; and go for good. I'm sick of it, d'ye hear ?—sick of it. You sit there, whiffling that I haven't eyes in my head, that I don't know black from white, that you'd rather hang your miserable carcase in your wretched old tree than take a respectable job. Well, hang it there—it won't break the branches if this is the only kind of meal you can give a visitor ! I'm done with you. I wash my hands of you. Do you hear ?"

He had—inaccurately—pantomimed the operation, sweeping over the jampot as he did so, and now drew in his breath—a cold breath, too ; as, with eyes fixed on the ever-lightening hedgerows beyond his oblong window, he remembered the renewed red-hot stab of pain that had transfixed the ball of his thumb.

It recalled him instantaneously to his surroundings. Scrambling up from his seat he ejected his head out of the cab into the open. "Whoa, there ! Whoa, I say : I'm getting out."

The horse was dragged up on to its haunches, the cab came to a standstill, and, to the roaring suspirations of the animal, the Fruit Merchant alighted on the tinkling ice of a frozen wayside puddle of water. He turned himself about. Time and the night had not tarried during his journey. The east was a blaze of moonlight. The moon glared in the grey heavens like a circular flat little window of glass.

"Wait here—" the Fruit Merchant bade his cabman in the desolation. "You've pretty near shaken the head off my body."

The cabman ducked his own small head in reply, and saluted his fare with a jerk of his whip. "You won't be long," he sang out between his whiskers.

"What did he mean by that?" was the Fruit Merchant's querulous question to himself as me mounted the few remaining yards of by-lane towards the crest of the slope. He was tired and elderly and cold. A pathetic look, one almost of sadness, came into his face. He pushed up his muffler and coughed. There replied the faintest echo from the low copse that bordered the lane. Grass, crystallised with hoarfrost, muffled his footsteps. What had he meant by that? repeated self to self, but not as if expectant of an answer.

When well out of sight of the cabman and his vehicle beneath the slope of the hill, the Fruit Merchant paused and lifted his eyes. League beyond league beneath him, as if to the confines of the world, the countryside spread on—frost-beclad meadow, wood and winding lane. And one sole house in sight, a small, tumbledown, lightless, huddling cottage, its ragged thatch and walls chequered black with shadow and dazzling white with wash of moonshine. And there—lifting itself into the empty skies, its twigs and branches sweeping the stars, stood, as if in wait for him, the single naked gigantic tree.

The Fruit Merchant gazed across at it, like an obese minute Belial on the ramparts of Eden. He had been fooled, then; tricked. He might have guessed the fatuity of his enterprise. He *had* guessed it. The

house was empty ; the bird had flown. Why for a single instant had he dreamed otherwise ? Simply because all these years he had been deceived into believing there was a kind of honesty in the fellow. Just that something quixotic, stupid, stubborn, dense, dull, demented which—nothing but lies, then.

That bee in his bonnet, that snake in his grass : nothing but lies. There was no principle by which you could judge a man like that ; and yet—well, after all, he was like anybody else. Give him a taste of the sweets of success, and his boosted solitude, his contempt for the mere decencies of life, his pretended disgust at men more capable and square-headed than himself had vanished into thin air. There were fools in the world, he had now discovered, who would pay ninety-seven guineas for a second or third hand scrabble of a drawing. “Right you are ; hand over the dibs, and I am off !”

A scornful yet lugubrious smile stole over the Fruit Merchant’s purplish features. He would be honest about it ; he positively enjoyed acknowledging when a rival had bested him over a bargain. He would even agree that he had always nursed his own little superstitions. And now all that fine silly talk—sheer fudge. He had been himself childish fool enough to be impressed by it ; yes, and to have been even a little frightened by—a tree.

He eyed it there—that gaunt, prodigious weed ; and then, with one furtive glance over his round shoulder towards the crest of the slope behind which lay his way of escape from this wintry landscape and from every memory of the buffoon who had cheated

him, he slowly descended the hill, pushed open the broken gate, and entered the icy untended garden.

Once more he came to a standstill in his frieze coat, and from under the brim of his hard hat stared up into the huge frigid branches. There is a supple lift and ease in the twigs of a tree asleep in winter. Green living buds are everywhere huddling close in their drowsy defences. Even the Fruit Merchant could distinguish between the dreaming and the dead, or, at any rate, between the unripe and the rotten.

And as he looked, two thoughts scurried like rats out of the wainscot of his mind. An unprecedented foreboding descended on him. These lean shrunken twigs, these massive vegetable bones—the tree was dead. And up there—he shifted rapidly to and fro in order to secure an uninterrupted view of a kind of huddling shape up aloft there, an object that appeared to be stooping crazily forward as if on a similar quest in respect to himself.

But, no. He took a deep breath. The muffled knocking against the wall of his head ceased. He need not have alarmed himself: an optical illusion. Nothing.

The tree *was* dead. That was clear—a gaunt, black, sapless nightmare. But the ungainly clump and shape, hoisted midway among its boughs was not a huddling human body. It was only yet another kind of derelict parasite—withered mistletoe. And that gentle pelican-like rattling high overhead was but the fingering of a faint breeze in the moonlight; clacking twig against twig.

Maybe it would have simplified matters if—

But no need to dwell on that. One corpse at a time was enough for any man on a night like this and in a country as cheerless as the plains of Gomorrah. A phrase or two out of his familiar bills of lading recurred to the Fruit Merchant's mind—"the act of God." There was something so horrific in the contorted set of the branches outthrust in ungainly menace above his head that he was reminded of no less a depravity than the devil himself. Thank the Lord, his half-brother had *not* remembered to send him a parcel of the fruit.

If ever poison showed in a plant, it haunted every knot and knuckle of this tree. Judgment had overtaken it—the act of God. That's what came of boasting. That's what came of idling a useless life away in a daydream at other people's expense. And now the cunning bird was flown. The insult of his half-brother's triumph stabbed the Fruit Merchant like a sword.

A sudden giddiness, the roar as of water, caused in part no doubt by the posture of his head, again swept over him, reverberated in his ears. He thrust a cautious hand into the breast of his coat and lowered his eyes. They came to a stay on the rugged moonlit bole. And there, with a renewed intensity of gaze, they once more fixed themselves.

The natural living bark of the tree had been of a russet grey, resembling that of the beech. Apart from a peculiar shimmeringness due to the frost that crystallised it over, and as the skin of a dead thing, that bark now suggested the silveriness of leprosy. So far, so good. But midway up the unbranched

bole, at the height of five to six feet from the ground, appeared a wide peculiar cicatrice. The iridescent greyness here abruptly ended. Above it stretched a clear blank ring of darker colour, knobbed over, in and out, with tiny sparkling clusters of fungi.

The Fruit Merchant stole in a pace or two. No feat of the inhuman this. Cleanly and precisely the thick rind of the tree must some time since have been cut and pared away in a wide equal ring ; a ring too far from the ground to have been the work of pigs or goats, too smooth and sharp-edged to have been caused by the gnawings of cattle. It was perfectly plain ; the sap-protecting skin of the thing had been deliberately cut and hacked away. The tree had been murdered. High in the moonlit heavens it gloated there : a victim.

Not until then did the Fruit Merchant stealthily turn and once more survey his half-brother's house. The slow and almost furtive movement of his head and shoulders suggested that the action was involuntary. From this garden side the aspect of the hovel was even more abject and disconsolate. Its one ivy-clustered chimney-stack was smokeless. The moonbeams rained softly and mercilessly on the flint walls, the boarded windows, the rat-and-bird-ravaged thatch.

Only a spectre could be content with such a dwelling, and a guilt-stricken wretch at that. Yet without any doubt in the world the house was still inhabited. For even now a slender amber beam of light leaned out at an obtuse angle from some crevice in the shuttering wood into the vast bath of moonshine.

For a moment the Fruit Merchant hesitated. He could leave the garden and regain his cab without nearing the house. He could yet once more "wash his hands." Certainly, after sight of the maniac's treacherous work on his unique God-given tree he hadn't the faintest vestige of a desire to confront his half-brother. Quite the reverse. He would far rather fling a second hundred pounds after the first than be once more contaminated by his company. There was something vile in his surroundings.

In shadows black as pitch, like these, any inconceivably evil creature might lie in covert. If the tree alive could decoy an alien fauna to its succulent nectar, the tree dead might well invite even less pleasing ministrations. Come what come would, he was prepared. It might startle him ; but he was dead-cold already ; and when your whole mind is filled with disgust and disquiet there is no room for physical fear. You merely want to shake yourself free—edge out and be off.

Nevertheless, the human intruder in this inhuman wilderness was already, and with infinite caution, making his way towards the house. On a pitch-black night he might have hesitated. Hadn't venomous serpents the habit of stealing for their winter slumber into the crannies and hollows of fallen wood? Might not even the lightest northern zephyr bring down upon his head another vast baulk of timber from the withered labyrinth above? But so bright was the earth's lanthorn, so still the starry sky, that he could hear and even see the seeds from the humbler winter weeds scattering out from their

yawning pods, as, with exquisite care, he brushed on through the tangling growths around him.

And having at length closely approached the walls, standing actually within a jutting shadow, he paused yet again and took a deep breath into his body before, gently lifting himself, he set his eye to the crevice from which poured out that slender shaft of light.

So artificially brilliant was the room within—by comparison with the full moonlight of the Fruit Merchant's natural world without—that for an instant or two he saw nothing. But he persevered, and after a while his round protruding eye found itself master of at least half the space on the other side of the shutters. Stilled through and through, his fingers clutching the frosted sill, he stood there half suspended on his toes, and as if hypnotised.

For scarcely more than a yard distant from his own there stooped a face—his half-brother's : a face to haunt you to your dying day. It was surmounted by a kind of nightcap, and was almost unrecognisable. The unfolding of the hours of twelve solitary years had played havoc with the once-familiar features. The projecting brows above the angular cheek-bones resembled polished stone. The ears stood out like the vans of a bat on either side above the corded neck. The thin unkempt beard on the narrow jaw brushed the long gnarled hand that was moving with an infinite tedious care on the bare table beneath it.

Motionlessly the hanging paraffin lamp poured its radiance upon this engrossed cadaverous visage, revealing every line and bone, hollow and wrinkle.

Nevertheless its possessor, this old man, shrunken and hideous in his frame of abject poverty, his arms drawn close up to his fallen body, worked sedulously on and on. And behind and around him showed the fruit of his labours. Pinned to the scaling walls, propped on the ramshackle shelf above his fireless hearthstone, and even against the stale remnant of a loaf of bread on the cracked blue dish beside him, was a litter of pictures. And everywhere, lovely and marvellous in all its guises—the tree. The tree in May's showering loveliness, in summer's quiet wonder, in autumn's decline, in naked slumbering wintry grace. The colours glowed from the fine old rough paper like lamps and gems.

There were drawings of birds too, birds of dazzling plumage, of flowers and butterflies, their crimson and emerald, rose and saffron seemingly shimmering and astir ; their every mealy and feathery and pollened boss and petal and plume on fire with hoarded life and beauty. And there a viper with its sinuous molten scales ; and there a face and a shape looking out of its nothingness such as would awake even a dreamer in a dream.

Only three sounds in that night-quiet, and these scarcely discernible, stirred in the watcher's ear : the faint shrill sing-song of the flame of the lamp, the harsh wheezy breath of the artist, and a faint scuttling as of rats or mice. This austere and dying creature must have come in at last from the world of nature and mankind a long time ago. The arm that had given the tree its quietus had now not the strength to lift an axe. Yet the ungainly fingers toiled assiduously on.

The Fruit Merchant, spying in on the old half-starved being that sat there, burning swiftly away among his insane gewgaws, as nearly broke out crying as laughing. He was frightened and elated; mute and bursting with words. The act of God! Rather than even remotely resemble that old scarecrow in his second childhood pushing that tiny-bladed knife across the surface of a flat of wood, he would—. An empty and desolate look stole into the gazing eye.

Not that he professed to understand. He knew nothing. His head was completely empty. The last shred of rage and vindictiveness had vanished away. He was glad he had come, for now he was going back. What little of the present and future remained would soon be the past. He, too, was ageing. *His* life also was coming to an end. He stared on—oh, yes. And not even a nephew to inherit his snug fat little fortune. Worldly goods, shipload on shipload—well, since he could not take them away with him, he would leave them behind. He would bequeath them to charity, to the W.F.M.P.A. perhaps; and he would make a note of the hundred pounds.

Not in malice; only to leave things business-like and in order; to do your duty by a greedy and ungrateful world even though you were soon to be washing your hands of that, too. All waste, nothing but waste. But he thanked the Lord he had kept his sanity, that he was respected; that he wasn't in the artificial fruit trade—the stuff your grandmother belled under glass. He thanked the Lord he wasn't

foul to look at ; foul probably to smell ; and a poison even to think about.

Yet still he peeped on—this old Tom, though at no Lady Godiva. “They” would buy right enough—there was no doubt of that. Christie’s would some day be humming with the things. He didn’t deny the old lunatic that. He knew a bird when he saw it—even on paper. Ninety-seven guineas : at that rate there was more money swimming about in this pestilent hovel than ever even he himself could lay his practised hands on.

And there were fools in plenty—rich, dabbling, affected, silly fools—dillytanties, you called ‘em—who would never know that their lying, preposterous P. P. had destroyed the very life of the tree that had given its all for him. And why ? And why ? The Fruit Merchant was almost tempted to burn down the miserable cabin over his half-brother’s head. Who could tell ? . . . A gust of wind stirred in the bedraggled thatch, feebly whined in the keyhole.

And at that moment, as if an angry and helpless thought could make itself audible even above the hungry racketing of mice and the melancholic whistling of a paraffin lamp—at that moment the corpse-like countenance, almost within finger-touch on the other side of the table, slowly raised itself from the labour of its regard, and appeared to be searching through the shutter’s cranny as if into the Fruit Merchant’s brain. The glance swept through him like an avalanche. No, no. But one instantaneous confrontation, and he had pushed himself

back from the impious walls as softly as an immense sack of hay.

These were not eyes—in that abominable countenance. Speck-pupilled, greenish-grey, unfocused, under their protuberant mat of eyebrow, they remained still as a salt and stagnant sea. And in their uplifted depths, stretching out into endless distances, the Fruit Merchant had seen regions of a country whence neither for love nor money he could ever harvest one fruit, one pip, one cankered bud. And blossoming there beside a glassy stream in the mid-distance of far-mountained sward—a tree. . .

In after-years an old, fat, vulgar, and bronchitic figure, muffled up in a pathetic shawl, would sometimes be seen seated in a place of honour, its hard square hat upon its thick bald skull, within positive reach of the jovial auctioneer's ivory hammer. To purchase every "P. P." that came into the market was a dream beyond even a multi-millionaire's avarice. But small beetles or grubs or single feathers drawn "from the life" were within scope of the Fruit Merchant's purse. The eye that showed not the faintest vestige of reflected glory from the orange of the orange, the gamboge of the lemon, or the russet bronze of the pomegranate—in their crated myriads—would fitfully light up awhile as one by one, and with reiterated grunts of satisfaction, he afterwards in the secrecy of his home consigned these indifferent and "early" works of art to the flames.

But since his medical man has warned him that any manifestation of passion would almost unquest-

ionably prove his ultimate manifestation of anything, he steadily avoided thinking of the tree. Yet there it remained, unexorcisable, ineradicable, in his fading imagination.

Indeed, he finally expired in the small hours one black winter's morning, and as peacefully as a child, having dreamed that he was looking through a crevice into what could not be hell, but might be limbo or purgatory, the place of departed spirits. For there sat his half-brother, quite, quite still. And all around him, to be seen, haunted gay and painted birds and crystal flowers and damasked butterflies ; and, as it were, sylphs and salamanders, shapes of an unearthly beauty. And all of them strangely, preternaturally still, as if in a peepshow, as if stuffed.

OUT OF THE DEEP

THE steely light of daybreak, increasing in volume and intensity as the East grew larger with the day, showed clearly at length that the prodigious yet elegant Arabian bed was empty. What might tenderly have cradled the slumbers of some exquisite Fair of romance now contained no human occupant at all. The whole immense room—its air dry and thin as if burnt—was quiet as a sepulchre.

To the right of the bed towered a vast and heavily carved wardrobe. To the left, a lofty fire place of stone flanked by its grinning frigid dogs. A few cumbrous and obscure oil paintings hung on the walls. And, like the draperies of a proscenium, the fringed and valanced damask curtains on either side the two high windows, poured down their motionless cataract of crimson.

They had been left undrawn over night, and yet gave the scene a slight theatricality, a theatricality which the painted nymphs disporting themselves on the ceiling scarcely helped to dispel.

Not that these coy and ogling faces suggested any vestige of chagrin at the absence of the young man who for some weeks past had shared the long nights with them. They merely smiled on. For, after all, Jimmie's restless head upon the pillow had never really been in harmony with his pompous inanimate surroundings—the thin high nose, like the beak of a small ship, between the fast-sealed lids and narrow cheekbones, the narrow bird-like brow, the shell of the ear slightly pointed. If, inspired by the distant

music of the spheres, the painted creatures had with this daybreak broken into song, it would certainly not have been to the tune of "Oh where, and oh where is my little dog gone?" There was even less likelihood of Jimmie's voice now taking up their strains from out of the distance.

And yet, to judge from appearances, the tongue within that head might have been that of an extremely vivacious talker—even though, apart from Mrs. Thripps, its talk these last few days had been for the most part with himself.

Indeed, as one of his friends had remarked: "Don't you believe it. Jimmie has pots and pots to say, though he don't say it. That's what makes him such a dam good loser." Whether or not; if Jimmie *had* been in the habit of conversing with himself, he must have had odd company at times.

Night after night he had lain there, flat on his back, his hands crossed on his breast—a pose that never failed to amuse him. A smooth eminence in the dark rich quilt about sixty inches from his chin indicated to his attentive eye the points of his toes. The hours had been heavy, the hours had been long—still there are only twelve or so of utter darkness in the most tedious of nights, and matins tinkles at length. Excepting the last of them—a night, which was now apparently for ever over, he had occupied this majestic bed for about six weeks, though on no single occasion could he have confessed to being really at home in it.

He had chosen it, not from any characteristic whim or caprice, and certainly not because it dominated the

room in which his Uncle Timothy himself used to sleep, yes, and for forty years on end, only at last to expire in it. He had chosen it because, when its Venetian blinds were pulled high up under the fringed cornice, it was as light as a London April sky could make it ; and because—well, just one single glance in from the high narrow doorway upstairs had convinced him that the attic in which he was wont to sleep as a small boy was simply out of the question. A black heavy flood of rage swept over him at sight of it—he had never before positively realised the abominations of that early past. To a waif and stray any kind of shelter is, of course, a godsend, but even though this huge sumptuous barrack of a house had been left to him (or, rather, abandoned to him) by his Uncle Timothy's relict, Aunt Charlotte, Jimmie could not—even at his loosest—have been described as homeless.

Friendless rather—but that of his own deliberate choice. Not so very long ago, in fact, he had made a clean sweep of every single living being, male or female, to whom the term friend could, with some little elasticity, be applied. A little official affair, to put it politely, eased their exit. And then, this vacant hostel. The house, in fact (occupied only by a caretaker in the service of his Aunt's lawyers) had been his for the asking at any time during the last two or three years. But he had steadily delayed taking possession of it until there was practically no alternative.

Circumstances accustom even a young man to a good many inconveniences. Still it would have been a little too quixotic to sleep in the street, even though his Uncle Timothy's house, as mere "property," was

little better than a white and unpleasing elephant. He could not sell it, that is, not *en masse*. It was more than dubious if he was legally entitled to make away with its contents.

But, quite apart from an extreme aversion to your Uncle Timothy's valuables in themselves, you cannot eat, even if you can subsist on, articles of *virtu*. Sir Richard Grenville—a hero for whom Jimmie had every respect—may have been accustomed to chewing up his wine-glass after swigging off its contents. But this must have been on the spur of an impulse, hardly in obedience to the instinct of self-preservation. Jimmie would have much preferred to balance a chair at the foot of his Uncle's Arabian bed and salute the smiling lips of the painted nymphs on the ceiling. Though even that experiment would probably have a rather gritty flavour. Still, possession is nine points of the law, and necessity is the deadly enemy of convention. Jimmie was unconscious of the faintest scruples on that score.

His scruples, indeed, were in another direction. Only a few days ago—the day, in fact, before his first indulgence in the queer experience of pulling the bell—he had sallied out with his Aunt Charlotte's black leather dressing bag positively bulging with a pair of Bow candlesticks, an illuminated missal, mutely exquisite, with its blues and golds and crimsons, and a tiny old silver-gilt bijouterie box. He was a young man of absurdly impulsive aversions, and the dealer to whom he carried this further consignment of loot was one of them.

After a rapid and contemptuous examination, this

gentleman spread out his palms, shrugged his shoulders, and suggested a sum that would have caused even a more phlegmatic connoisseur than his customer's Uncle Timothy to turn in his grave.

And Jimmie replied, nicely slurring his r's, "Really Mr. So-and-so, it is impossible. No doubt the things have an artificial value, but not for me. I must ask you to oblige me by giving me only half the sum you have kindly mentioned. Rather than accept *your figure*, you know, I would—well, perhaps it would be impolite to tell you what I would prefer to do. *Dies irae, ditis illa*, and so on."

The dealer flushed, though he had been apparently content to leave it at that. He was not the man to be easily insulted by a good customer. And Jimmie's depredations were methodical. With the fastidiousness of an expert he selected from the rare and costly contents of the house only what was light and portable and became inconspicuous by its absence. The supply he realised, though without any perceptible animation, however recklessly it might be squandered, would easily last out his lifetime.

Certainly *not*. After having once made up his mind to accept this Uncle Timothy's posthumous hospitality, the real difficulty was unlikely to be a conscientious one. It was the attempt merely to accustom himself to the house—the hated house—that grew more and more arduous. It falsified his hope that, like other experiences, this one would prove only the more piquant for being so precarious. Days and moments quickly flying—just his one funny old charwoman, Mrs. Thripps, himself, and the Past.

After pausing awhile under the dingy and dusty portico, Jimmie had entered into his inheritance on the last afternoon in March. The wind was fallen ; the day was beginning to narrow ; a chill crystal light hung over the unshuttered staircase. By sheer force of a forgotten habit he at once ascended to the attic in which he had slept as a child

Pausing on the threshold, he looked in, conscious not so much of the few familiar sticks of furniture—the trucklebed, the worn strip of Brussels carpet, the chipped blue-banded ewer and basin, the framed illuminated texts on the walls—as of a perfect hive of abhorrent memories.

That high cupboard in the corner from which certain bodiless shapes had been wont to issue and stoop at him cowering out of his dreams ; the crab-patterned paper that came alive as you stared ; the window cold with menacing stars ; the mouseholes, the rusty grate—trumpet of every wind that blows—these objects at once lustily shouted at him in their own original tongues.

Quite apart from themselves, they reminded him of incidents and experiences which at the time could scarcely have been so nauseous as they now seemed in retrospect. He found himself suffocatingly resentful even of what must have been kindly intentions. He remembered how his Aunt Charlotte used to read to him—with her puffy cheeks, plump ringed hands, and the moving orbs of her eyes showing under her spectacles.

He wasn't exactly accusing the past. Even in his first breeches he was never what could be called a

nice little boy. He had never ordered himself lowly and reverently to any of his betters—at least in their absence. Nevertheless, what stirred in his bosom as he gazed in on this discarded scene was certainly not remorse.

He remembered how gingerly and with what peculiar breathings, his Uncle Timothy used to lift his microscope out of its wooden case ; and how, after the necessary manipulation of the instrument, he himself would be bidden mount a footstool and fix his dazzled eye on the slides of sluggish or darting horrors of minute magnified “life.” And how, after a steady um-aw-ing drawl of inapprehensible instruction, his uncle would suddenly flick out a huge silk pocket handkerchief as a signal that little tongue-tied nervous boys were themselves nothing but miserable sluggish or darting reptiles, and that his nephew was the most deplorable kind of little boy.

Jimmie remembered, too, once asking the loose bow-shaped old gentleman in his chair if he might himself twist the wheel ; and his Uncle Timothy had replied in a loud ringing voice, and almost as if he were addressing a public meeting : “Um, ah, my boy, I say No to that !” He said No to most things, and just like that, if he vouchsafed speech at all.

And then there was Church on Sundays ; and his hoop on weekdays in the Crescent ; and days when, with nothing to do, little Jimmie had been wont to sit watching the cold silvery rain on the window, the body he was in slowly congealing the while into a species of rancid suet pudding. Mornings too, when his Aunt Charlotte would talk nasally to him about Christian-

ity ; or when he was allowed to help his Uncle and a tall scared parlourmaid dust and re-arrange the contents of a cabinet or bureau. The smell of the air, the check duster, the odious *objets d'art* and the ageing old man snorting and looking like a superannuated Silenus beside the neat and frightened parlourmaid—it was a curious thing ; though Death with his louring grin had beckoned him off : there he was—alive as ever.

And when amid these ruminations, Jimmie's eyes had at last fixed themselves on the frayed dangling cord that hung from the ceiling over the trucklebed, it was because he had already explored all that the name Soames had stood for. Soames the butler—a black-clothed, tub-bellied, pompous man that might have been his Uncle Timothy's impoverished first cousin or illegitimate step-brother : Soames : Soames.

Soames used frequently to wring Jimmie's then protuberant ears. Soames sneaked habitually ; and with a sort of gloating piety on his drooping face, was invariably present at the subsequent castigation. Soames had been wont to pile up his plate with lumps of fat that even Destiny had never intended should consort with any single leg of mutton or even sirloin of beef—jelly-like, rapidly cooling *nuggets* of fat. And Soames invariably brought him cold rice pudding when there was hot ginger roll.

Jimmie remembered the lines that drooped down from his pale long nose. The sleek set of his whiskers as he stood there in his coat-tails reflected in the glass of the sideboard, carving the Sunday joint.

But that slack green bell-cord!—his very first glimpse

of it had set wagging *score*, of peculiar remembrances. First, and not so very peculiarly, perhaps, it recalled an occasion when, as he stood before his Aunt's footstool to bid her Good-night, her aggrieved pupils had visibly swum down from beneath their lids out of a nap, to fix themselves and look at him at last as if neither he nor she, either in this or in any other world, had ever so much as seen one another before. Perhaps his own face, if not so puffy, appeared that evening to be unusually pasty and pallid—with those dark rings which even to this day added vivacity and lustre to his extremely clear eyes. And his Aunt Charlotte had asked him why he was such a cowardly boy and so wickedly frightened of the dark.

"You know very well your dear Uncle will not permit gas in the attic, so there's no use asking for it. You have nothing on your conscience, I trust? You have not been talking to the servants?"

Infallible liar, he had shaken his head. And his Aunt Charlotte in return wagged hers at him.

"It's no good staring in that rebellious sullen way at me. I have told you repeatedly that if you are really in need of anything, just ring the bell for Soames. A good little boy with nothing on his conscience *knows* that God watches over him. I hope you are at least trying to be a good little boy. There is a limit even to your Uncle's forbearance."

It was perfectly true. Even bad little boys might be "watched over" in the dead of night, and as for his Uncle Timothy's forbearance, he had discovered the limitations of that fairly early in life.

Well, it was a pity, he smiled to himself, that his

Aunt Charlotte could not be present to see his Uncle Timothy's bedroom on that first celebration of their prodigal nephew's return. Jimmie's first foray had been to range the house from attic to cellar (where he had paused to rest) for candlesticks. And that night something like six dozen of the "best wax" watched over his heavy and galvanic slumbers in the Arabian bed. Aunt Charlotte, now rather more accustomed to the dark even than Jimmie himself, would have opened her eyes at *that*.

Gamblers are naturally superstitious folk, he supposed ; but that was the queerest feature of the whole thing. He had not then been conscious of even the slightest apprehension or speculation. It was far rather a kind of ribaldry than any sort of foreboding that had lit up positive constellations of candles as if for a Prince's—as if for a princely Cardinal's—lying-in-state.

It had taken a devil of a time too. His Uncle Timothy's port was not the less potent for a long spell of obscure mellowing, and the hand that held the taper had been a shaky one. Yet it had proved an amusing process too. Almost childish. Jimmie hadn't laughed like that for years. Certainly until then he had been unconscious of the feeblest squeamish inkling of anything—apart from old remembrances—peculiar in the house. And yet—well, no doubt even the first absurd impulsive experiment that followed *had* shaken him up.

Its result would have been less unexpected if he hadn't made a point and almost a duty of continually patrolling the horrible old vacant London mansion.

Hardly a day had lately passed—and there was nothing better to do—but it found him on his rounds. He was not waiting for anything (except for the hour, maybe, when he would have to wait no more). Nevertheless, faithful as the sentinel on Elsinore's hoary ramparts, he would find himself day after day treading almost catlike on from room to room, surveying his paradoxical inheritance, jotting down a list in a nice order of the next "sacrifices," grimacing at the Ming divinities, and pirouetting an occasional long nose at the portraits on the walls.

He had sometimes had a few words—animated ones, too—with Mrs. Thripps, and perhaps if he could have persuaded himself to talk "sensibly," and not to gesticulate, not to laugh himself so easily into a fit of coughing, she would have proved better company. She was amazingly honest and punctual and quiet; and why to Heaven a woman with such excellent qualities should customarily wear so scared a gleam in her still, colourless eyes, and be so idiotically timid and nervous in his company, he could not imagine.

She was being paid handsome wages anyhow; and, naturally, he was aware of no rooted objection to other people helping themselves; at least if they managed it as skilfully as he did himself. But Mrs. Thripps, it seemed, had never been able in any sense at all to help herself. She was simply a crape-bonneted "motherly" creature, if not excessively intelligent, if a little slow in seeing "points." It was, indeed, her alarm when he asked her if she had happened to notice any young man about the house that had irritated

him—though, of course, it was hardly fair not to explain what had given rise to the question. That was perfectly simple. It was like this.—

For years—for centuries, in fact—Jimmie had been, except in certain unusual circumstances, an exceedingly bad sleeper. He still hated sleeping in the dark. But a multitude of candles at various degrees of exhaustion make rather lively company when you are sick of your Uncle Timothy's cellar. And even the best of vintage wines may prove an ineffectual soporific. His, too, was a wretchedly active mind.

Even as a boy he had thought a good deal about his Uncle and Aunt, and Soames, and the house, and the Rev. Mr. Grayson, and spectres, and schoolmasters, and painted nymphs, and running away to sea, and curios, and dead silence, and his early childhood. And though, since then, other enigmas had engaged his attention, this purely automatic and tiresome activity of mind still persisted.

On his oath he had been in some respects and in secret rather a goody-goody little boy; though his piety had been rather the off-spring of fear than of love. Had he not been expelled from Mellish's almost solely for that reason? What on earth was the good of repeatedly thrashing a boy when you positively knew that he has lied merely from terror of your roaring voice and horrible white face?

But there it was; if there had been someone to talk to, he would not have talked so much to himself. He would not have lain awake thinking, night after night, like a rat in a trap. Thinking was like a fountain. Once it gets going at a certain pressure, well, it

is almost impossible to turn it off. And, my hat! what odd things come up with the water !

On the particular night in question, in spite of the candles and the mice and the moon, he badly wanted company. In a moment of pining yet listless jocosity, then, he had merely taken his Aunt Charlotte's advice. True, the sumptuous crimson pleated silk bell-pull, dangling like a serpent with a huge tassel for skull over his Uncle Timothy's pillow, was a more formidable instrument than the yard or two of frayed green cord in the attic. Yet they shared the same purpose. Many a time must his Uncle Timothy have stretched up a large loose hand in that direction when in need of Soames's nocturnal ministrations. And now, alas, both master and man were long since gone the way of all flesh. You couldn't, it appeared, pull bells in your coffin.

But Jimmie was not as yet in his coffin, and as soon as his fingers slipped down from the smooth pull, the problem, in the abstract, as it were, began to fascinate him. With cold froggy hands crossed over his beautiful puce-patterned pyjamas, he lay staring at the crimson tassel till he had actually seen the hidden fangs flickeringly jet out at him.

The effort, then, must have needed some little courage. It *might* almost have needed a tinge of inspiration. It was in no sense intended as a challenge. He would, in fact, rather remain alone than chance summoning —well, *any* (once animate) relic of the distant past. But obviously the most practical way of proving —if only to yourself—that you can be content with your own reconnaissances in the very dead of night,

was to demonstrate to that self that, even if you should ask for it, assistance would not be forthcoming.

He had been as fantastic as that. At the prolonged, pulsating, faint, distant tintinnabulation he had fallen back on to his pillow with an absurd little quicket of laughter, like that of a naughty boy up to mischief. But instant sobriety followed. Poor sleepers should endeavour to compose themselves. Tampering with empty space, stirring up echoes in pitch-black pits of darkness is scarcely sedative. And then, as he lay striving with extraordinary fervour not to listen, but to concentrate his mind on the wardrobe, and to keep his eyes from the door, that door must gently have opened.

It must have opened, and as noiselessly closed again. For a more or less decent-looking young man, seemingly not a day older than himself was now apparent in the room. It might almost be said that he had insinuated himself into the room. But well-trained domestics are accustomed to move their limbs and bodies with a becoming unobtrusiveness. There was also that familiar slight inclination of the apologetic in this young man's pose, as he stood there solitary in his black, in that terrific blaze of candle light. And for a sheer solid minute the occupant of the Arabian bed had really stopped thinking.

When indeed you positively press your face, so to speak, against the crystalline window of your eyes, your mind is apt to become a perfect vacuum. And Jimmie's first rapid and instinctive "Who the devil . . . ?" had remained inaudible.

In the course of the next few days Jimmie was to

become familiar (at least in memory) with the looks of this new young butler or valet. But first impressions are usually the vividest. The dark blue-grey eyes, the high nose, the scarcely perceptible smile, the slight stoop of the shoulders—there was no doubt of it. There was just a flavour, a flicker, there, of resemblance to himself. Not that he himself could ever have cut as respectful and respectable a figure as that. And the smile!—the fellow seemed to be ruminating over a thousand dubious, long-interred secrets, secrets such as one may be a little cautious of digging up even to share with one's self.

His face turned sidelong on his pillow, and through air as visibly transparent as a sheet of glass, Jimmie had steadily regarded this strange bell-answerer; and the bell-answerer had never so much as stirred his frigid glittering eyes in response. The silence that hung between them produced eventually a peculiar effect on Jimmie. Menials as a general rule should be less emphatic personally. Their unobtrusiveness should surely not emphasise their immanence. It had been Jimmie who was the first to withdraw his eyes, only once more to find them settling as if spellbound on those of his visitor.

Yet, after all, there was nothing to take offence at in the young man's countenance or attitude. He did not seem even to be thinking-back at the bell-puller; but merely to be awaiting instructions. Yet Jimmie's heart at once rapidly began to beat again beneath his icy hands. And at last he made a perfectly idiotic response.

Wagging his head on his pillow, he turned abruptly

away. "It was only to tell you that I shall need nothing more to-night," he had said.

Good Heavens. The fatuity of it! He wanted, thirsted for, scores upon scores of things. Aladdin's was the cupidity of a simpleton by comparison. Time, and the past, for instance, and the ability to breathe again as easily as if it were natural—as natural as the processes of digestion. Why, if you were intent only on a little innocent companionship, one or two of those nymphs up there would be far more amusing company than Mrs. Thripps. If, that is, apart from yearning to their harps and viols, they could have been persuaded to scrub and sweep. Jimmie wanted no other kind of help. There is a beauty that is but skin-deep.

Altogether it had been a far from satisfactory experience. Jimmie was nettled. His mincing tones echoed on in his mind. They must have suggested that he was unaccustomed to menservants and bell-pulls and opulent surroundings. And the fellow had instantly taken him at his word. A solemn little rather agreeable and unservile inclination of the not unfriendly head—and he was gone.

And there was Jimmie, absolutely exhausted, coughing his lungs out, and entirely incapable of concluding whether the new butler was a creature of actuality or of dream. Well, well, well: that was nothing new. That's just how things do take one in one's weak moments, in the dead of night. Nevertheless, the experience had apparently proved sedative. He had slept like an infant.

The morning found him vivacious with curiosity.

He had paused to make only an exceedingly negligent toilet before beginning his usual wanderings about the house. Calm cold daylight reflection may dismiss almost any nocturnal experience as a dream, if, at any rate, one's temperature in the night hours is habitually above the norm. But Jimmie could not, or would not, absolutely make up his mind. So clear a picture had his visitant imprinted on his memory that he even found himself (just like a specialist sounding a patient in search of the secret ravages of phthisis)—he had even found himself stealthily tapping over the basement walls—as if in search of a concealed pantry ! A foolish proceeding if one has not the least desire in the world to attract the attention of one's neighbours.

Having at length satisfied himself in a rather confused fashion that whatever understudy of Soames might share the house with him in the small hours, he must be a butler of the migratory order. Jimmie then began experimenting with the bells. Mounted on a kitchen chair, cornice brush in hand, he had been surprised by Mrs. Thripps, in her quiet boots, as he stood gently knocking one by one the full eighteen of the long greened crooked jingle row which hung open-mouthed above the immense dresser.

She had caught him in the act, and Jimmie had once more exercised his customary glib presence of mind.

“They ought to be hung in a scale, you know. Oughtn’t they, Mrs. Thripps ? Then we could have ‘Home, sweet Home !’ and a hunting up and a hunting down, grandsires and treble bobs, and a grand

maximus, even on week days. And if we were in danger of any kind of fire—which *you* will never be, we could ring them backwards. *Couldn't* we, Mrs. Thripps? Not that there's much quality in them—no medieval monkish tone or timbre in *them*. They're a bit mouldy, too, and one can't tell t'other from which. Not like St. Faiths's! One would recognise that old clanker in one's shroud, wouldn't one, Mrs. Thripps? Has it ever occurred to you that the first campanologist's real intention was not so much to call the congregation, as to summon—well—what the congregation's after?"

"Yes, sir," Mrs. Thripps had agreed, her watery grey eyes fixed largely on the elevated young man. "But it don't matter which of them you ring; I'll answer *hany*—at least while I'm in the house. I don't think, sir, you rest your mind enough. My own boy, now: *he's* in the Navy"

But with one graceful flourish Jimmie had run his long-handled brush clean East to West along the clanging row. "You mustn't," he shouted, "you shouldn't. Once aboard the lugger, they are free! It's *you mothers*" He gently shook his peculiar wand at the flat-looking little old woman. "No, Mrs. Thripps; what I'm after is *he who is here, here! couchant, perdu, laired*, in these same subterranean vaults when you and I are snug in our nightcaps. A most nice-spoken young man! *Not* in the Navy, Mrs. Thripps!"

And before the old lady had had time to seize any one of these seductive threads of conversation, Jimmie had flashed his usual brilliant smile or grimace at her, and soon afterwards sallied out of the

house to purchase a further gross or two of candles.

Gently and furtively pushing across the counter half a sovereign—not as a douceur, but merely as from friend to friend—he had similarly smiled back at the secretive-looking old assistant in the staid West End family-grocer's.

"No, I didn't suppose you *could* remember me. One alters. One ages. One deals elsewhere. But anyhow, a Happy New Year to you—if the next ever comes, you know."

"You see, sir," the straight-aproned old man had retorted with equal confidentiality, "it is not so much the alterations. They are what you might call un-circum-ventible, sir. It's the stream, sir. Behind the counter here, we are like rocks in it. But even if I can't for the moment put a thought to your face—though it's already stirring in me in a manner of speaking, I shall in the future, sir. You may rely upon that And the same, sir, to you ; and many of them, I'm sure."

Somehow or other Jimmie's vanity had been mollified by this pleasing little ceremoniousness ; and that even before he had smiled yet once again at the saffron young lady in the Pay Box.

"The truth is, my dear," he had assured himself, as he once more ascended into the dingy porch, "the truth *is* when once you begin to tamper, you won't know where you are. You won't, really."

And that night he had lain soberly on, in a peculiar state of physical quiescence and self-satisfaction, his dark bright eyes wandering from nymph to nymph,

his hands folded over his breast under the bedclothes, his heart persisting in its usual habits. Nevertheless, the fountain of his thoughts had continued softly to splash on in its worn basin. With ears a-cock, he had frankly enjoyed inhaling the parched, spent, brilliant air.

And when his fingers had at last manifested the faintest possible itch to experiment once more with the bell-pull, he had slipped out of bed, and hastily searching through a little privy case of his uncle's bedside books, had presently slipped back again, armed with a fat little copy of "*The Mysteries of Paris*," in its original French.

The next day a horrible lassitude descended upon him. For the better part of an hour he had stood staring out of the drawing-room window into the London street. At last, with a yawn that was almost a groan, and with an absurdly disproportionate effort, he turned himself about. Heavily hung the gilded chandeliers in the long vista of the room ; heavily gloomed the gilded furniture. Scarcely distinguishable in the obscurity of the further wall stood watching him from a mirror what might have appeared to be the shadowy reflection of himself. With a still, yet extreme aversion he kept his eyes fixed on this distant nonentity, hardly realising his own fantastic resolve that if he did catch the least faint independent movement there, he would give Soames Junior a caustic piece of his mind. . . .

He must have been abominably fast asleep for hours when, a night or two afterwards, he had suddenly awakened, sweat streaming along his body, his

mouth stretched to a long narrow O, and his right hand clutching the bell-rope, as might a drowning man at a straw.

The room was adrowse with light. All was still. The flitting horrors between dream and wake in his mind were already thinning into air. Through their transparency he looked out once more on the substantial, the familiar. His breath came heavily, like puffs of wind over a stormy sea, and yet a profound peace and tranquillity was swathing him in. The relaxed mouth was now faintly smiling. Not a sound, not the feeblest distant unintended tinkling was trembling up from the abyss. And for a moment or two the young man refrained even from turning his head at the soundless opening and closing of the door.

He lay fully conscious that he was not alone ; that quiet eyes had him steadily in regard. But, like rats, his wits were beginning to busy themselves again. Sheer relief from the terrors of sleep, shame of his extremity and weakness, a festering sense of humiliation—yes, he must save his face at all costs. He must put this preposterous spying valet in his place. Oddly enough, too, out of the deeps a peculiar little vision of recollection had inexplicably obtruded itself into consciousness. It would be a witticism of the first water.

“They are dreadfully out of season, you know,” he began murmuring affectedly into the hush, “dreadfully. But what I’m really pining for is a bunch of primroses . . . A primrose by the river’s brim . . . must be a little conservative.” His voice was once more trailing off into a maudlin drowsiness. With an

effort he roused himself, and now with an extremely sharp twist of his head, he turned to confront his visitor.

But the room was already vacant, the door ajar, and Jimmie's lids were on the point of closing again, sliding down over his tired eyes like leaden shutters which no power on earth could hinder or restrain, when at the faintest far whisper of sound they swept back suddenly—and almost incredibly wide—to drink in all they could of the spectacle of a small odd-looking child who at that moment had embodied herself in the doorway.

She seemed to have not the least intention of returning the compliment. Her whole gaze, from out of her fair flaxen-pigtailed face, was fixed on the coarse blue-banded kitchen bowl which she was carrying with extreme care and caution in her two narrow hands. The idiots down below had evidently filled it too full of water, for the pale wide-petalled flowers and thick crinkled leaves it contained were floating buoyantly nod-nod to and fro as she moved—pushing on each slippers foot in turn in front of the other, her whole mind concentrated on her task.

A plain child, but extraordinarily fair, as fair as the primroses themsleves in the congregation of candle-light that motionlessly flooded the room—a narrow-chested long-chinned little creature who had evidently outgrown her strength. Jimmie was well accustomed to take things as they come ; and his brief sojourn in his uncle's house in his present state of health had already enlarged the confines of the term "things." Anyhow, she was a relief from the Valet.

He found himself, then, watching this new visitor without the least trace of astonishment or even of surprise. And as his dark eyes coursed over the child, he simply couldn't decide whether she most closely "took after" Soames Junior or Mrs. Thripps. All he could positively assure himself of was just the look, "the family likeness." And that in itself was a queerish coincidence, since whatever your views might be regarding Soames Junior, Mrs. Thripps was real enough—as real, at any rate, as her scrubbing-brush and her wholesome evil-smelling soap.

As a matter of fact, Jimmie was taking a very tight hold of himself. His mind might fancifully be compared to a quiet green swarming valley between steep rock-bound hills in which a violent battle was proceeding—standards and horsemen and smoke and terror and violence—but no sound.

Deep down somewhere he really wanted to be "nice" to the child. She meant no ill; she was a demure far-away harmless-looking creature. Ages ago . . . On the other hand he wished to heaven they would leave him alone. They were pestering him. He knew perfectly well how far he was gone, and bitterly resented this renewed interference. And if there was one thing he detested, it was being made to look silly—"I hope you are trying to be a good little boy? . . . You have not been talking to the servants?" That kind of thing.

It was, therefore, with mixed feelings and with a tinge of shame-facedness that he heard his own sneering toneless voice insinuate itself into the silence; "And what, missikins, can I do for you? . . . What,

you will understand ; not *How?*" The sneer had degenerated into a snarl.

The child at this had not perceptibly faltered. Her face had seemed to lengthen a little, but that might have been due solely to her efforts to deliver her bowl without spilling its contents. Indeed she actually succeeded in so doing, almost before Jimmie had time to withdraw abruptly from the little gilt-railed table on which she deposited the clumsy pot. Frock, pigtail, red hands—she seemed to be as "real" a fellow creature as you might wish to see. But Jimmie stared quizzically on. Unfortunately primroses have no scent, so that he could not call on his nose to bear witness to his eyes. And the congested conflict in the green valley was still proceeding.

The child had paused. Her hands hung down now as if they were accustomed to service ; and her pale blue eyes were fixed on his face in that exasperating manner which suggests that the owner of them is otherwise engaged. Not that she was looking *through* him. Even the sharpest of his "female friends" had never been able to boast of that little accomplishment. She was looking into him ; and as if he occupied time rather than space. Or was she, sneered that weary inward voice again, was she merely waiting for a tip ?

"Look here," said Jimmie, dexterously raising himself to his elbow on the immense lace-fringed pillow, "it's all very well ; you have managed things quite admirably, considering your age and the season, and so on. But I didn't ask for primroses, I asked for violets. That's very old trick—very old trick."

For one further instant, dark and fair, crafty and

simpleton face communed, each with each. But the smile on the one had fainted into a profound child-like contemplation. And then, so swift and imperceptible had been his visitant's evanishment out of the room, that the very space she had occupied seemed to remain for a while outlined in the air—a nebulous shell of vacancy. She must, apparently, have glided *backwards* through the doorway, for Jimmie had assuredly not been conscious of the remotest glimpse of her pigtail from behind.

Instantly on that, the stony hillside within had resounded with a furious clangour—cries and shouts and screamings—and Jimmie, his face bloodless with rage, his eyes almost blind with it, had leapt out of the great bed as if in murderous pursuit. There must, however, have been an unusual degree or so of fever in his veins that night so swift was his reaction. For the moment he was on his feet an almost unendurable self-pity had swept into possession of him. To take a poor devil as literally as that! To catch him off his guard; not to give him the mere fleck of an opportunity to get his balance, to explain, to answer back! Curse the primroses.

But there was no time to lose.

With one hand clutching his pyjamas, the other carrying the bowl, he poked forward out of the flare of the room into the cold lightlessness of the wide stone staircase.

"Look here," he called down in a low argumentative voice, "look here, You! You can cheat and you can cheat, but to half strangle a fellow in his sleep, and then send him up the snuffling caretaker's daughter—

No, No Next time, you old makebelieve, we'd prefer company a little more—a little more *congenial*."

He swayed slightly, grimacing vacantly into the darkness, and listening to his speech as dimly as might a somnambulist to the distant roar of falling water. And then, poor benighted creature, Jimmie tried to spit, but his lips and tongue were dry, and that particular insult was spared him.

He had stooped laboriously, had put down the earthenware bowl on the Persian mat at the head of the staircase, and was self-congratulatorily re-welcoming himself into the scene of still lustre he had dared for that protracted minute to abandon, when he heard as if from beneath and behind him a kind of lolloping disquietude and the sound as of a clumsy-clawed, but persistent animal pushing its uncustomary awkward way up the soap-polished marble staircase.

It was to be tit for tat, then. The miserable ménage had let loose its menagerie. That. They were going to experiment with the mouse-cupboard-and-keyhole trickery of his childhood. Jimmie was violently shivering; his very toes were clinging to the mat on which he stood.

Swaying a little, and casting at the same time a strained whitened glance round the room in which every object rested in the light as if so it had rested from all eternity, he stood mutely and ghastly listening.

Even a large bedroom, five times the size of a small boy's attic, affords little scope for a fugitive, and

shutting your eyes, darkening your outward face, is no escape. It had been a silly boast, he agreed—that challenge, that “dare” on the staircase ; the boast of an idiot. For the “congenial company” that had now managed to hoof and scrabble its way up the slippery marble staircase was already on the threshold.

All was utterly silent now. There was no obvious manifestation of danger. What was peering steadily in upon him out of the obscurity beyond the door, was merely a blurred whitish beast-like shape with still, passive, almost stagnant eyes in its immense fixed face. A perfectly ludicrous object—on paper. Yet a creature so nauseous to soul and body, and with so obscene a greed in its motionless piglike grin that with one vertiginous swirl Jimmie’s candles had swept up in his hand like a lateral race of streaming planets into outer darkness.

If his wet groping fingers had not then encountered one of the carved pedestals of his uncle’s bedstead, Jimmie would have fallen ; Jimmie would have found in fact, the thing’s physical level.

Try as he might, he had never in the days that followed made quite clear in his mind why for the third time he had not made a desperate plunging clutch at the bell rope. The thing *must* have been Soames Junior’s emissary, even if the bird-faced scullery maid with the primroses had not also been one of the “staff.”

That he had desisted simply in case she should herself have answered his summons and so have encountered the spurious animal as she mounted the dark staircase seemed literally too “good” to be true. Not

only was Jimmie no sentimentalist, but that particular kind of goodness, even in a state of mind perfectly calm and collected, was not one of his pleasanter characteristics.

Yet facts are facts—even comforting ones. And unless his memory was utterly untrustworthy, he had somehow—somehow contrived to regain his physical balance. Candelabrum in hand, he had actually, indeed, at last emerged from the room, and stooped his dark head over the balusters in search of what unaccountably had *not* awaited his nearer acquaintance. And he had—he must have—flung the substantial little blue-banded slop-basin, primroses and all, clean straight down in the direction of any kind of sentient target that happened to be in its way.

"You must understand, Mrs. Thripps," he had afterwards solemnly explained, "I don't care to be disturbed, and particularly at night. All litter should, of course, be immediately cleared away. That's merely as things go in a well-regulated household, as, in fact, they *do* go. And I see you have replaced the one or two little specimens I was looking over out of the cabinet on the staircase. Pretty things, too ; though you hadn't the advantage of being in the service of their late owner—my uncle. As *I* was. Of course, too, breakages cannot be avoided. There, I assure you, you are absolutely free. Moth and rust, Mrs. Thripps. No ; all that I was merely enquiring about at the moment is that particular pot. There was an accident last night—primroses and so on. And one might have expected, one might almost have sworn, Mrs. Thripps, that at least a shard or two, as the

Psalmist says, would have been pretty conspicuous even if the water *had* completely dried away. Not that I heard the smash, mind. I don't go so far as that. Nor am I making any insinuations *whatever*. You are the best of good creatures, you are indeed—and it's no good looking at me like Patience on a monument; because at present life is real and life is earnest. All I mean is that if one for a single moment ceases to guide one's conduct on reasonable lines—well, one comes a perfectly indescribable cropper, Mrs. Thripps. Like the pot."

Mrs. Thripps's grey untidy head had remained oddly stuck out from her body throughout this harangue. "No, sir," she repeated once more. "High and low I've searched the house down, and there isn't a shadder of what you might be referring to, not a shadder. And once more, I ask you, sir; let me call in Dr. Stokes. He's a very nice gentleman; and one as keeps what should be kept as close to himself as it being his duty he sees right and proper to do. Chasing and racketing of yourself up and down these runs of naked stairs—in the dead of night—is no proper place for you, sir, in *your* state. And I don't like to take the responsibility. It's first the candles, then the bells, and then the kitching, and then the basin; I know what I'm talking about, sir, having lost two, and one at sea."

"And suppose, my dear," Jimmie had almost as brilliantly as ever smiled; "suppose we are all of us 'at sea.' What then?"

"Why then, sir," Mrs. Thripps had courageously retorted, "I'd as lief be at the bottom of it. There's

been as much worry and trouble and making two ends meet in *my* life not to make the getting out of it what you'd stand on no ceremony for. I say it with all decent respect for what's respectful and proper, sir ; but there isn't a morning I step down those area steps but my heart's in my mouth for fear there won't be anything in the house but what can't answer back. It's been a struggle to keep on, sir ; and you as generous a gentleman as need be, if only you'd remain warm and natural in your bed when once there."

A little inward trickle of laughter had entertained Jimmie as he watched the shapeless patient old mouth utter these last few words.

"That's just it, Mrs. Thripps," he had replied softly. "You've done for me far more effectively than anyone I care to remember in my insignificant little lifetime. You have indeed." Jimmie had even touched the hand bent like the claw of a bird around the broom-handle. "In fact, you know—and I'm bound to confess it as gratefully as need be—they are *all* of them doing for me as fast as they can. I don't complain, not the least little bit in the world. All that I might be asking is, How the devil—to put it politely—how the goodness gracious is one to tell which is which? In my particular case, it seems to be the miller that sets the wind : not, of course, that he's got any particular grain to grind. Not even wild oats, you funny old mother of a youthful mariner. No, no, no. Even the fact that there wasn't perhaps any pot after all, you will understand, doesn't positively prove that neither could there have been any primroses. And before next January's four months old we shall be at the end of yet

another April. At least——” and a sort of almost bluish pallor had spread like a shadow over his face——“at least you will be. All of which is only to say, dear Madam, as Beaconsfield remarked to Old Vic., that I am thanking you now.”

At which Mrs. Thripps immediately fell upon her knees on her housemaid’s pad and plunged her hands into her zinc pail—only instantly after to sit back on her heels, skinny hands on canvas apron. “All I says, sir, is, We go as we go ; and a nicer gentleman, taking things on the surface, I never worked for. But one don’t want to move too much in the Public Heye, sir. Of all the houses below stairs I’ve worked for and all alone in I don’t want to charnst on a more private in a manner of speaking than this. All that I was saying, sir, and I wouldn’t to none but you, is the life’s getting on my nerves. When that door there closes after me, and every day drawing out steady as you can see without so much as glancing at the clock—I say, to myself, Well, better that pore young gentleman alone up there at night, cough and all, than *me*. I wouldn’t sleep in this house, sir, not if you was to offer me a plateful of sovereigns. . . Unless, sir, you *wanted* me.”

On reflection Jimmie decided that he had cut almost a gallant figure as he had retorted gaily—yet with extraordinary sobriety :—“You shall have a whole dishful before I’m done, Mrs. Thripps—with a big scoop in it for the gravy. But on my oath, I assure you there’s absolutely nothing or nobody in this old barn of a museum except you and me. Nobody, unless, of course, you will understand, one happens

to pull the bell. And that we're not likely to do in broad daylight. Are we, Mrs. Thripps?" Upon which he had hastily caught up his aunt's handbag and had emerged into a daylight a good deal bleaker if not broader than he could gratefully stomach.

For a while Jimmie had let well alone. Indeed, if it had been a mere matter of choice, he would far rather have engaged in a friendly and jocular conversation of this description with his old charwoman than in the endless monologues in which he found himself submerged on other occasions. One later afternoon, for instance, at half-past three by his watch, sitting there by a small fire in the large muffled drawing room, he at length came definitely to the conclusion that some kind of finality should be reached in his relations with the Night Staff in his Uncle Timothy's.

It was pretty certain that *his* visit would soon be drawing to a close. Staying out at night until he was almost too exhausted to climb down to the pavement from his hansom—the first April silver of dawn wanning the stark and empty chimney-pots—had proved a dull and tedious alternative. The mere spectator of gaiety, he concluded, as he stared at the immense picture of the Colosseum on his Uncle Timothy's wall, may have as boring a time as must the slaves who cleaned out the cages of the lions that ate the Christians. And snapping out insults at former old cronies who couldn't help their faces being as tiresome as a whitewashed pigsty had soon grown wearisome.

Jimmie, of course, was accustomed to taking no interest in things which did not interest him ; but quite respectable people could manage that equally well. What fretted him almost beyond endurance was an increasing inability to keep his attention fixed on what was really *there*, what at least all such respectable people, one might suppose, would unanimously agree was there.

A moment's fixture of the eyes—and he would find himself steadily, steadily listening, now in a creeping dread that somewhere, down below, there was a good deal that needed an almost constant attention, and now in sudden alarm that, after all, there was absolutely nothing. Again and again in recollection he had hung over the unlighted staircase listening in an extremity of foreboding for the outbreak of a rabbit-like childish squeal of terror which would have proved—well, *what* would it have proved ? My God, what a world ! You can prove nothing.

The fact that he was all but certain that any such intolerably helpless squeal never *had* wailed up to him out of its pit of blackness could be only a partial consolation. He hadn't meant to be a beast. It was only his facetious little way. And you would have to be something pretty piggish in pigs to betray a child—however insubstantial—into the nausea and vertigo he had experienced in the presence of that unspeakable abortion. The whole thing had become a fatuous obsession. If, it appeared, you only remained solitary and secluded enough, and let your mind wander on in its own sweet way, the problem was almost bound to become, if not your one and only, at least your chief

concern. Unless you were preternaturally busy and preoccupied, you simply couldn't live on and on in a haunted house without being occasionally reminded of its ghosts.

To dismiss the matter as pure illusion—the spectral picturing of life's fitful fever—might be all very well ; that is if you had the blood of a fish. But who on earth had ever found the world the pleasanter and sweeter a place to bid good-bye to simply because it was obviously "substantial," whatever *that* might mean ? Simply because it did nothing you wanted it to do unless you paid for it pretty handsomely ; or unless you accepted what it proffered with as open a hospitality as Jimmie had bestowed on his pilgrims of the night. Not that he much wanted—however pressing the invitation—to wander off out of his body into a better world, or, for that matter, into a worse.

Upstairs under the roof years ago Jimmie as a small boy would rather have died of terror than meddle with the cord above his bed-rail—simply because he knew that Soames Senior was at the other end of it. He had hated Soames ; he had merely feared the nothings of his night hours. But, suppose Soames had been a different kind of butler. There must be almost as many kinds as there are human beings. Suppose his Uncle Timothy and Aunt Charlotte had chosen theirs a little less idiosyncratically ; what then ?

Well, anyhow, in a sense, he was not sorry life had been a little exciting these last few weeks. How odd that what all but jellied your soul in your body at night or in a dream, might merely amuse you like a

shilling shocker in the safety of day. The safety of day—at the very cadence of the words in his mind, as he sat there in his aunt's "salon," his limbs huddled over Mrs. Thripps's fire, Jimmie's eyes had fixed themselves again. Again he was listening. Was it that, if you saw "*in your mind*" *any* distant room 'of place, that place must actually at the moment contain you—some self, some "astral body?" If so, wouldn't, of course, you *hear* yourself moving about in it?

There was a slight whining wind in the street outside the rainy window that afternoon, and once more the bright idea crossed Jimmie's mind that he should steal upstairs before it was dark, mount up on to the Arabian bed and just cut the bell-pull—once for all. But would that necessarily dismiss the Staff? Necessarily? His eye wandered to the discreet S of yet another bell-pull—that which graced the wall beneath the expansive white marble chimney-piece.

He hesitated. There was no doubt his mind was now hopelessly jaundiced against all bell-ropes—whether they failed to summon one to church or persisted in summoning one to a six-foot hole in a cemetery. His Uncle Timothy lay in a Mausoleum. On the other hand he was properly convinced that a gentleman is as a gentleman does, and that it was really "*up to you*" to treat *all* bell-answerers with decent courtesy. No matter who, when, where. A universal rule like that is a sheer godsend. If they didn't answer, well, you couldn't help yourself. Or rather, you would have to.

This shivering was merely physical. When a fellow is so thin that he can almost hear his ribs grid one

against the other when he stoops to pick up a poker, such symptoms must be expected. There was still an hour or two of daylight—even though clouds admitted only a greyish light upon the world, and his Uncle Timothy's house was by nature friendly to gloom. That house at this moment seemed to hang domed upon his shoulders like an immense imponderable shell. The flames in the chimney whispered, fluttered, hovered, like fitfully-playing, once-happy birds.

Supposing if, even against his better judgment, he leaned forward now in his chair and—what was infinitely more conventional and in a sense more proper than summoning unforseen entities to one's bedside—supposing he gave just one discreet little tug at that small porcelain knob; what would he ask for? He need ask nothing. He could act. Yes, if he could be perfectly sure that some monstrous porcine caco-demon akin to the shapes of childish nightmare would come hoofing up out of the deeps at his behest—well, he would chance it. He would have it out with the brute. It was still day.

It was still day. But, maybe, the car of pleasanter visitors might catch the muffled tinkle? In the young man's mind there was now no vestige of jocularity. In an instant's lightness of heart he had once thought of purchasing from the stiff-aproned old assistant at his Aunt Charlotte's family grocer's, a thumping big box of Chocolates. Why, just that one small bowl in *famille rose* up there could be bartered for the prettiest little necklace of seed pearls. She had done her best—with her skimpy shoulders, skimpier pigtail and

soda-reddened hands. Pigtail ! But no ; you might pull real bells : to pull dubiously genuine pigtails seemed now a feeble jest. The old Jimmie of that kind of face-tiousness was a thing of the past.

Apart from pigs and tweeny-maids, what other peculiar emanations might in the future respond to his summonings, Jimmie's exhausted imagination could only faintly prefigure. For a few minutes a modern St. Anthony sat there in solitude in the vast half-blinded London drawing-room ; while shapes and images and apparitions of memory and fantasy sprang into thin being and passed away in his mind. No, no.

“Do to the Book ; quench the candles ;
Ring the bell. *Amen, Amen.*”

—he was done with all that. Maledictions and anathemas ; they only tangled the hank.

So when at last—his meagre stooping body mutely played on by the flamelight—he jerked round his dark narrow head to glance at the distant mirror, it must have been on the mere after-image, so to speak, of the once quite substantial-looking tweeny-maid that his exhausted eyes thirstily fixed themselves.

She was there—over there, where Soames Junior had more than once taken up his obsequious station. She was smiling—if the dusk of the room could be trusted that far; and not through, but really *at* Jimmie. She was fairer than ever, fairer than the flaxenest of nymphs on his uncle's ceiling, fairer than the saffronest of young ladies in the respectablest of family grocers, fairer even then——

Jimmie hung on this simple vision as did Dives on the spectacle of Lazarus in bliss. At once, of course,

after his very first sigh of relief and welcome, he had turned back on his lips a glib little speech suggesting forgiveness—Let auld acquaintance be forgot ; that kind of thing. He was too tired even to be clever now. And the oddest of convictions had at once come into his mind—seemed almost to fill his body even—that she was waiting for something else. Yes, she was smiling as if in hope. She was waiting to be told to go. Jimmie was no father. He didn't want to be considerate to the raw little creature, to cling to her company for but a few minutes longer, with a view to returns in kind. No, nothing of all that. "Oh, my God ; my God !" a voice groaned within him, but not at any unprecedented jag or stab of pain.

The child was still waiting. Quite quietly there—as if a shadow, as if a secret and obscure ray of light. And it seemed to Jimmie that in its patient face hung veil upon veil of uncountable faces of the past—in paint, stone, actuality, dream—that he had glanced at or brooded on in the enormous history of his life. That he may have coveted, too. And as well as his rebellious features could and would, he smiled back at her.

"I understand, my dear," he drew back his dry lips to explain. "Perfectly. And it was courtesy itself of you to look in when I didn't ring. I *didn't*. I absolutely put my tongue out at the grinning old knob. . . . But no more of that. One mustn't talk for talking's sake. Else, why all those old Trappists . . . though none of 'em such a bag-of-bones as me, I bet. But without jesting, you know. . . ."

Once more a distant voice within spoke in Jimmie's

ear. "It's important"; it said. "You really must hold your tongue—until, well, it holds itself." But Jimmie's face continued to smile.

And then suddenly, every vestige of amusement abandoned it. He stared baldly almost emptily at the faint inmate of his solitude. "All that I have to say," he muttered, "is just this:—I have Mrs. Thripps. I haven't absolutely cut the wire. I wish to be alone. But *if* I ring, I'm not *asking*, do you see? In time I may be able to know what I want. But what is important now is that no more than that accursed Pig were your primroses 'real,' my dear. You see things *must* be real. And now, I suppose," he had begun shivering again, "you must go to—you must go. But listen! listen! we part friends!"

The coals in the grate, with a scarcely audible shuffling, recomposed themselves to their consuming.

When there hasn't been anything there, nothing can be said to have vanished from the place where it has not been. Still, Jimmie had felt infinitely colder and immeasurably lonelier when his mouth had thus fallen to silence; and he was so empty and completely exhausted that his one apprehension had been lest he should be unable to ascend the staircase to get to bed. There was no doubt of it: his ultimatum had been instantly effective. The whole house was now preternaturally empty. It was needless even to listen to prove that. So absolute was its pervasive quietude that when at last he gathered his bones together in the effort to rise, to judge from the withering colour of the cinders and ashes in the fireplace, he must have

been for some hours asleep ; and daybreak must be near.

He managed the feat at last, gathered up the tartan travelling shawl that had tented in his scarecrow knees, and lit the only candle in its crystal stick in his Aunt Charlotte's drawing-room. And it was an almost quixotically peaceful though forebodeful Jimmie who, step by step, the fountain of his thoughts completely stilled, his night-mind as clear and sparkling as a cavern bedangled with stalagmites and stalactites, climbed laboriously on and up, from wide shallow marble stair to stair.

He paused in the corridor above. But the nymphs within—Muses, Graces, Fates, what not—piped in vain their mute decoy. His Uncle Timothy's Arabian bed in vain summoned him to its downy embraces. At the wide-open door he brandished his guttering candle in a last smiling gesture of farewell : and held on.

That is why when, next morning, out of a sounding slanting shower of rain Mrs. Thripps admitted herself into the house at the area door, she found the young man, still in his clothes, lying very fast asleep indeed on the trucklebed in the attic. His hands were not only crossed but convulsively clenched in that position on his breast. And it appeared from certain distressing indications that he must have experienced a severe struggle to refrain from a wild blind tug at the looped-up length of knotted whipcord over his head.

As a matter of fact it did not occur to the littered

old charwoman's mind to speculate whether or not Jimmie had actually made such a last attempt. Or whether he had been content merely to wait on Soames who might, perhaps, like all good servants, come when he was wanted rather than when he was called. All her own small knowledge of Soameses, though not without comfort, had been acquired at second-hand.

Nor did Mrs. Thripps waste time in surmising how Jimmie could ever have persuaded himself to loop up the cord like that out of his reach, unless he had first become abysmally ill-content with his small, primitive, and belated knowledge of campanology.

She merely looked at what was left of him ; her old face almost comically transfixed in its appearance of pity, horror, astonishment, and curiosity.

THE CREATURES

It was the ebbing light of evening that recalled me out of my story to a consciousness of my whereabouts. I dropped the squat little red book to my knee and glanced out of the narrow and begrimed oblong window. We were skirting the eastern coast of cliffs, to the very edge of which a ploughman, stumbling along behind his two great horses, was driving the last of his dark furrows. In a cleft far down between the rocks a cold and idle sea was soundlessly laying its frigid garlands of foam. I stared over the flat stretch of waters, then turned my head, and looked with a kind of suddenness into the face of my one fellow-traveller.

He had entered the carriage, all but unheeded, yet not altogether unresented, at the last country station. His features were a little obscure in the fading daylight that hung between our four narrow walls, but apparently his eyes had been fixed on my face for some little time.

He narrowed his lids at this unexpected confrontation, jerked back his head, and cast a glance out of his mirky glass at the slip of greenish-bright moon that was struggling into its full brilliance above the dun, swelling uplands.

"It's a queer experience, railway-travelling," he began abruptly, in a low, almost deprecating voice, drawing his hand across his eyes. "One is cast into a passing privacy with a fellow-stranger and then is gone." It was as if he had been patiently awaiting the attention of a chosen listener.

and cheese in pocket, from the bare old house I lodged in, bound for that unforeseen nowhere for which the heart, the fantasy aches. Lingering hot noondays would find me stretched in a state half-comatose, yet vigilant, on the close-flowered turf of the fields or cliffs, on the sun-baked sands and rocks, soaking in the scene and life around me like some pilgrim chameleon. It was in hope to lose my way that I would set out. How shall a man find his way unless he lose it? Now and then I succeeded. That country is large, and its land and sea marks easily cheat the stranger. I was still of an age, you see, when my 'small door' was ajar, and I planted a solid foot to keep it from shutting. But how could I know what I was after? One just shakes the tree of life, and the rare fruits come tumbling down, to rot for the most part in the lush grasses.

"What was most haunting and provocative in that far-away country was its fleeting resemblance to the country of dream. You stand, you sit, or lie prone on its bud-starred heights, and look down; the green, dispersed, treeless landscape spreads beneath you, with its hollows and mounded slopes, clustering farmstead, and scatter of village, all motionless under the vast wash of sun and blue, like the drop-scene of some enchanted playhouse centuries old. So, too, the visionary bird-haunted headlands, veiled faintly in a mist of unreality above their broken stones and the enormous saucer of the sea.

"You cannot guess there what you may not chance upon, or whom. Bells clash, boom, and quarrel hollowly on the edge of darkness in those breakers.

Voices waver across the fainter winds. The birds cry in a tongue unknown yet not unfamiliar. The sky is the hawks' and the stars'. *There* one is on the edge of life, of the unforeseen, whereas our cities—are not our desiccated jaded minds ever continually pressing and edging further and further away from freedom, the vast unknown, the infinite presence, picking a fool's journey from sensual fact to fact at the tail of that he-ass called Reason? I suggest that in that solitude the spirit within us realises that it treads the outskirts of a region long since called the Imagination. I assert we have strayed, and in our blindness abandoned—”

My stranger paused in his frenzy, glanced out at me from his obscure corner as if he had intended to stun, to astonish me with some violent heresy. We puffed out slowly, laboriously, from a “Halt” at which in the gathering dark and moonshine we had for some while been at a standstill. Never was wedding-guest more desperately at the mercy of ancient mariner.

“Well, one day,” he went on, lifting his voice a little to master the resounding heart-beats of our steam-engine—“one late afternoon, in my goal-less wanderings, I had climbed to the summit of a steep grass-grown cart-track, winding up dustily between dense, untended hedges. Even then I might have missed the house to which it led, for, hair-pin fashion, the track here abruptly turned back on itself, and only a far fainter footpath led on over the hill-crest. I might, I say, have missed the house and—and its

inmates, if I had not heard the musical sound of what seemed like the twangling of a harp. This thin-drawn, sweet, tuneless warbling welled over the close green grass of the height as if out of space. Truth cannot say whether it was of that air or of my own fantasy. Nor did I ever discover what instrument, whether of man or Ariel, had released a strain so pure and yet so bodiless.

"I pushed on and found myself in command of a gorse-strewn height, a stretch of country that lay a few hundred paces across the steep and sudden valley in between. In a V-shaped entry to the left, and sunwards, lay an azure and lazy tongue of the sea. And as my eye slid softly thence and upwards and along the sharp, green horizon line against the glass-clear turquoise of space, it caught the flinty glitter of a square chimney. I pushed on, and presently found myself at the gate of a farmyard.

"There was but one straw-mow upon its staddles. A few fowls were sunning themselves in their dust-baths. White and pied doves preened and cooed on the roof of an outbuilding as golden with its lichens as if the western sun had scattered its dust for centuries upon the large slate slabs. Just that life and the whispering of the wind: nothing more. Yet even at one swift glimpse I seemed to have trespassed upon a peace that had endured for ages; to have crossed the viewless border that divides time from eternity. I leaned, resting, over the gate, and could have remained there for hours, lapsing ever more profoundly into the blessed quietude that had stolen over my thoughts.

"A bent-up woman appeared at the dark entry of a stone shed opposite to me, and, shading her eyes, paused in prolonged scrutiny of the stranger. At that I entered the gate and, explaining that I had lost my way and was tired and thirsty, asked for some milk. She made no reply, but after peering up at me, with something between suspicion and apprehension on her weather-beaten old face, led me towards the house which lay to the left on the slope of the valley, hidden from me till then by plumy bushes of tamarisk.

"It was a low grave house, grey-chimneyed, its stone walls traversed by a deep shadow cast by the declining sun, its dark windows rounded and uncurtained, its door wide open to the porch. She entered the house, and I paused upon the threshold. A deep unmoving quiet lay within, like that of water in a cave renewed by the tide. Above a table hung a wreath of wild flowers. To the right was a heavy oak settle upon the flags. A beam of sunlight pierced the air of the staircase from an upper window.

"Presently a dark long-faced gaunt man appeared from within, contemplating me, as he advanced, out of eyes that seemed not so much to fix the intruder as to encircle his image, as the sea contains the distant speck of a ship on its wide blue bosom of water. They might have been the eyes of the blind ; the windows of a house in dream to which the inmate must make something of a pilgrimage to look out upon actuality. Then he smiled, and the long, dark features, melancholy yet serene, took light upon them, as might a bluff of rock beneath a thin passing

wash of sunshine. With a gesture he welcomed me into the large dark-flagged kitchen, cool as a cellar, airy as a belfry, its sweet air traversed by a long oblong of light out of the west.

"The wide shelves of the painted dresser were laden with crockery. A wreath of freshly-gathered flowers hung over the chimney-piece. As we entered, a twittering cloud of small birds, robins, hedge-sparrows, chaffinches fluttered up a few inches from floor and sill and window-seat, and once more, with tiny starry-dark eyes observing me, soundlessly alighted. "I could hear the infinitesimal *tic-tac* of their tiny claws upon the slate. My gaze drifted out of the window into the garden beyond, a cavern of clearer crystal and colour than that which astounded the eyes of young Aladdin.

Apart from the twisted garland of wild flowers, the shining metal of range and copper candlestick, and the bright-scoured crockery, there was no adornment in the room except a rough frame, hanging from a nail in the wall, and enclosing what appeared to be a faint patterned fragment of blue silk or fine linen. The chairs and table were old and heavy. A low light warbling, an occasional *skirr* of wing, a haze-like drone of bee and fly—these were the only sounds that edged a quiet intensified in its profundity by the remote stirrings of the sea.

"The house was stilled as by a charm, yet thought within me asked no questions; speculation was asleep in its kennel. I sat down to the milk and bread, the honey and fruit which the old woman laid out upon the table, and her master seated himself

opposite to me, now in a low sibilant whisper—a tongue which they seemed to understand—addressing himself to the birds, and now, as if with an effort, raising those strange grey-green eyes of his to bestow a quiet remark upon me. He asked, rather in courtesy than with any active interest, a few questions, referring to the world, its business and transports—*our* beautiful world—as an astronomer in the small hours might murmur a few words to the chance-sent guest of his solitude concerning the secrets of Uranus or Saturn. There is another, an inexplorable side to the moon. Yet he said enough for me to gather that he, too, was of that small tribe of the aloof and wild to which our cracked old word ‘forsaken’ might be applied, hermits, lamas, clay-matted fakirs, and such-like; the snowy birds that play and cry amid mid-oceanic surges; the living of an oasis of the wilderness; which share a reality only distantly dreamed of by the time driven thought-corroded congregations of man.

“Yet so narrow and hazardous I somehow realised was the brink of fellow-being (shall I call it?) which we shared, he and I, that again and again fantasy within me seemed to hover over that precipice Night knows as fear. It was he, it seemed, with that still embracive contemplation of his, with that far-away yet reassuring smile, that kept my poise, my balance. ‘No,’ some voice within him seemed to utter, ‘you are safe; the bounds are fixed; though hallucination chaunt its decoy, you shall not irretrievably pass over. Eat and drink, and presently return to ‘life.’” And I listened, and, like that of a drowsy child in its cradle,

my consciousness sank deeper and deeper, stilled, pacified, into the dream amid which, as it seemed, this soundless house of stone now reared its walls.

"I had all but finished my meal when I heard footsteps approaching on the flags without. The murmur of other voices, distinguishably shrill yet guttural even at a distance, and in spite of the dense stones and beams of the house which had blunted their timbre, had already reached me. Now the feet halted. I turned my head—cautiously, even perhaps apprehensively—and confronted two figures in the doorway.

"I cannot now guess the age of my entertainer. These children—for children they were in face and gesture and effect, though as to form and stature apparently in their last teens—these children were far more problematical. I say 'form and stature,' yet obviously they were dwarfish. Their heads were sunken between their shoulders, their hair thick, their eyes disconcertingly deep-set. They were ungainly, their features peculiarly irregular, as if two races from the ends of the earth had in them intermingled their blood and strangeness ; as if, rather, animal and angel had connived in their creation.

"But if some inward light lay on the still eyes, on the gaunt, sorrowful, quixotic countenance that now was fully and intensely bent on mine, emphatically that light was theirs also. He spoke to them ; they answered—in English, my own language, without a doubt : but an English slurred, broken, and unintelligible to me, yet clear as bell, haunting, penetrating, pining as voice of nix or siren. My

ears drank in the sound as an Arab parched with desert sand falls on his dried belly and gulps in mouthfuls of crystal water. The birds hopped nearer as if beneath the rod of an enchanter. A sweet continuous clamour arose from their small throats. The exquisite colours of plume and bosom burned, greened, melted in the level sun-ray, in the darker air beyond.

"A kind of mournful gaiety, a lamentable felicity, such as rings in the cadences of an old folk-song, welled into my heart. I was come back to the borders of Eden, bowed and outworned, gazing from out of dream into dream, homesick, 'forsaken.'

"Well, years have gone by," muttered my fellow-traveller deprecatingly, "but I have not forgotten that Eden's primeval trees and shade.

"They led me out, these bizarre companions, a he and a she, if I may put it as crudely as my apprehension of them put it to me then. Through a broad door they conducted me—if one who leads may be said to be conducted—into their garden. Garden! A full mile long, between undiscerned walls, it sloped and narrowed towards a sea at whose dark unfoamed blue, even at this distance, my eyes dazzled. Yet how can one call that a garden which reveals no ghost of a sign of human arrangement, of human slavery, of spade or hoe?

"Great boulders shouldered up, tessellated, embossed, powdered with a thousand various mosses and lichens, between a flowering greenery of weeds. Wind-stunted, clear-emerald, lichen-tufted trees smoothed and crisped the inflowing airs of the ocean

with their leaves and spines, sibilating a thin scarce-audible music. Scanty, rank, and uncultivated fruits hung close their vivid-coloured cheeks to the gnarled branches. It was the harbourage of birds, the small embowering parlour of their house of life, under an evening sky, pure and lustrous as a water-drop. It cried 'Hospital' to the wanderers of the universe.

"As I look back in ever-thinning nebulous remembrance on my two companions, hear their voices gutturally sweet and shrill, catch again their being, so to speak, I realise that there was a kind of Orientalism in their effect. Their instant courtesy was not Western, the smiles that greeted me, whenever I turned my head to look back at them, were infinitely friendly, yet infinitely remote. So ungainly, so far from our notions of beauty and symmetry were their bodies and faces, those heads thrust heavily between their shoulders, their disproportioned yet graceful arms and hands, that the children in some of our English villages might be moved to stone them, while their elders looked on and laughed.

"Dusk was drawing near; soon night would come. The colours of the sunset, sucking its extremest dye from every leaf and blade and petal, touched my consciousness even then with a vague fleeting alarm.

"I remember I asked these strange and happy beings, repeating my question twice or thrice, as we neared the surfy entry of the valley upon whose sands a tiny stream emptied its fresh waters—I asked them if it was they who had planted this

multitude of flowers, many of a kind utterly unknown to me and alien to a country inexhaustibly rich. ‘We wait; we wait!’ I think they cried. And it was as if their cry woke echo from the green-walled valleys of the mind into which I had strayed. Shall I confess that tears came into my eyes as I gazed hungrily around me on the harvest of their patience?

“Never was actuality so close to dream. It was not only an unknown country, slipped in between these placid hills, on which I had chanced in my ramblings. I had entered for a few brief moments a strange region of consciousness. I was treading, thus accompanied, amid a world of welcoming and fearless life—oh, friendly to me!—the paths of man’s imagination, the kingdom from which thought and curiosity, vexed scrutiny and lust—a lust it may be for nothing more impious than the actual—had prehistorically proved the insensate means of his banishment. ‘Reality,’ ‘Consciousness’: had he for ‘the time being’ unwittingly, unhappily missed his way? Would he be led back at length to that garden wherein cockatrice and basilisk bask, harmlessly, at peace?

“I speculate now. In that queer, yes, and possibly sinister, company, sinister only because it was alien to me, I did not speculate. In their garden, the familiar was become the strange—‘the strange’ that lurks in the inmost heart, unburdens its riches in trance, flings its light and gilding upon love, gives heavenly savour to the intemperate bowl of passion, and is the secret of our incommunicable pity. What is yet queerer, these beings were evidently glad of my

company. They stumped after me (as might yellow men after some Occidental quadruped never before seen) in merry collusion of nods and wreathed smiles at this perhaps unprecedented intrusion.

"I stood for a moment looking out over the placid surface of the sea. A ship in sail hung phantom-like on the horizon. I pined to call my discovery to its seamen. The tide gushed, broke, spent itself on the bare boulders, I was suddenly cold and alone, and gladly turned back into the garden, my companions instinctively separating to let me pass between them. I breathed in the rare, almost exotic heat, the tenuous, honeyed, almond-laden air of its flowers and birds—gull, sheldrake, plover, wagtail, finch, robin, which as I half-angrily, half-sadly realised fluttered up in momentary dismay only at *my* presence—the embodied spectre of their enemy, man. Man? Then who were these? . . .

"I lost again a way lost early that morning, as I trudged inland at night. The dark came, warm and starry. I was dejected and exhausted beyond words. That night I slept in a barn and was awakened soon after daybreak by the crowing of cocks. I went out, dazed and blinking into the sunlight, bathed face and hands in a brook near by, and came to a village before a soul was stirring. So I sat under a thrift-cushioned, thorn-crowned wall in a meadow, and once more drowsed off and fell asleep. When again I awoke, it was ten o'clock. The church clock in its tower knelled out the strokes, and I went into an inn for food.

"A corpulent, blonde woman, kindly and hospit-

able, with a face comfortably resembling her own sow's, that yuffed and nosed in at the open door as I sat on my stool, served me with what I called for. I described—not without some vanishing shame, as if it were a treachery—my farm, its whereabouts.

"Her small blue eyes 'pigged' at me with a fleeting expression which I failed to translate. The name of the farm, it appeared, was Trevarras. 'And did you see any of the Creatures?' she asked me in a voice not entirely her own. 'The Creatures'? I sat back for an instant and stared at her; then realised that Creature was the name of my host, and Maria and Christus (though here her dialect may have deceived me) the names of my two gardeners. She spun an absurd story, so far as I could tack it together and make it coherent. Superstitious stuff about this man who had wandered in upon the shocked and curious inhabitants of the district and made his home at Trevarras—a stranger and pilgrim, a 'foreigner,' it seemed, of few words, dubious manners, and both uninformative.

"Then there was something (she placed her two fat hands, one of them wedding-ringed, on the zinc of the bar-counter, and peered over at me, as if I were a delectable 'wash'), then there was something about a woman 'from the sea.' In a 'blue gown,' and either dumb, inarticulate, or mistress of only a foreign tongue. She must have lived in sin, moreover, those pig's eyes seemed to yearn, since the children were 'simple,' 'naturals'—as God intends in such matters. It was useless. One's stomach may sometimes reject the cold sanative aerated water of

'the next morning,' and my ridiculous intoxication had left me dry but not yet quite sober.

"Anyhow, this she told me, that my blue woman, as fair as flax, had died and was buried in the neighbouring churchyard (the nearest to, though miles distant from, Trevarras). She repeatedly assured me, as if I might otherwise doubt so sophisticated a fact, that I should find her grave there, her 'stone.'

"So indeed I did—far away from the elect, and in a shade-ridden north-west corner of the sleepy, cropless acre : a slab, scarcely rounded, of granite, with but a name bitten out of the dark rough surface, '*Femina Creature.*'"

THE RIDDLE

So these seven children, Ann, and Matilda, James, William and Henry, Harriet and Dorothea, came to live with their grandmother. The house in which their grandmother had lived since her childhood was built in the time of the Georges. It was not a pretty house, but roomy, substantial, and square ; and an elm-tree outstretched its branches almost to the windows.

When the children were come out of the cab (five sitting inside and two beside the driver), they were shown into their grandmother's presence. They stood in a little black group before the old lady, seated in her bow-window. And she asked them each their names, and repeated each name in her kind, quavering voice. Then to one she gave a work-box, to William a jack-knife, to Dorothea a painted ball ; to each a present according to age. And she kissed all her grand-children to the youngest.

"My dears," she said, "I wish to see all of you bright and gay in my house. I am an old woman, so that I cannot romp with you ; but Ann must look to you, and Mrs. Fenn too. And every morning and every evening you must all come in to see your granny ; and bring me smiling faces, that call back to my mind my own son Harry. But all the rest of the day, when school is done, you shall do just as you please, my dears. And there is only one thing, just one, I would have you remember. In the large spare bedroom that looks out on the slate roof there stands in the corner an old oak chest ; aye, older than I, my dears, a great deal older ; older than my

grandmother. Play anywhere else in the house, but not there." She spoke kindly to them all, smiling at them ; but she was very aged, and her eyes seemed to see nothing of this world.

And the seven children, though at first they were gloomy and strange, soon began to be happy and at home in the great house. There was much to interest and to amuse them there ; all was new to them. Twice every day, morning and evening, they came in to see their grandmother, who every day seemed more feeble ; and she spoke pleasantly to them of her mother, and her childhood, but never forgetting to visit her store of sugar-plums. And so the weeks passed by.

It was evening twilight when Henry went upstairs from the nursery by himself to look at the oak chest. He pressed his fingers into the carved fruit and flowers, and spoke to the dark-smiling heads at the corners ; and then, with a glance over his shoulder, he opened the lid and looked in. But the chest concealed no treasure, neither gold nor baubles, nor was there anything to alarm the eye. The chest was empty, except that it was lined with silk of old-rose, seeming darker in the dusk, and smelling sweet of pot-pourri. And while Henry was looking in, he heard the softened laughter and the clinking of the cups downstairs in the nursery ; and out at the window he saw the day darkening. These things brought strangely to his memory his mother who in her glimmering white dress used to read to him in the dusk ; and he climbed into the chest ; and the lid closed gently down over him.

When the other six children were tired with their playing, they filed into their grandmother's room as usual for her good-night and her sugar-plums. She looked out between the candles at them as if she were unsure of something in her thoughts. The next day Ann told her grandmother that Henry was not anywhere to be found.

"Dearie me, child. Then he must be gone away for a time," said the old lady. She paused. "But remember all of you, do not meddle with the oak chest."

But Matilda could not forget her brother Henry, finding no pleasure in playing without him. So she would loiter in the house thinking where he might be. And she carried her wood doll in her bare arms, singing under her breath all she could make up about him. And when in a bright morning she peeped in on the chest, so sweet-scented and secret it seemed that she took her doll with her into it—just as Henry himself had done.

So Ann, and James, and William, Harriet and Dorothea were left at home to play together. "Some day maybe they will come back to you, my dears," said their grandmother, "or maybe you will go to them. Heed my warning as best you may."

Now Harriet and William were friends together, pretending to be sweethearts; while James and Dorothea liked wild games of hunting, and fishing, and battles.

On a silent afternoon in October Harriet and William were talking softly together, looking out over the slate roof at the green fields, and they heard the squeak and frisking of a mouse behind them in the

room. They went together and searched for the small, dark hole from whence it had come out. But finding no hole, they began to finger the carving of the chest, and to give names to the dark-smiling heads, just as Henry had done. "I know! let's pretend you are Sleeping Beauty, Harriet," said William, "and I'll be the Prince that squeezes through the thorns and comes in." Harriet looked gently and strangely at her brother; but she got into the box and lay down, pretending to be fast asleep; and on tiptoe William leaned over, and seeing how big was the chest he stepped in to kiss the Sleeping Beauty and to wake her from her quiet sleep. Slowly the carved lid turned on its noiseless hinges. And only the clatter of James and Dorothea came in sometimes to recall Ann from her book.

But their old grandmother was very feeble, and her sight dim, and her hearing extremely difficult.

Snow was falling through the still air upon the roof; and Dorothea was a fish in the oak chest, and James stood over the hole in the ice, brandishing a walking-stick for a harpoon, pretending to be an Esquimaux. Dorothea's face was red, and her wild eyes sparkled through her tousled hair. And James had a crooked scratch upon his cheek. "You must struggle, Dorothea, and then I shall swim back and drag you out. Be quick now!" He shouted with laughter as he was drawn into the open chest. And the lid closed softly and gently down as before.

Ann, left to herself, was too old to care overmuch for sugar-plums, but she would go solitary to bid her grandmother good-night; and the old lady looked

wistfully at her over her spectacles. "Well, my dear," she said with trembling head; and she squeezed Ann's fingers between her own knuckled finger and thumb. "What lonely old people, we are, to be sure!" Ann kissed her grandmother's soft, loose cheek. She left the old lady sitting in her easy chair, her hands upon her knees, and her head turned sidelong towards her.

When Ann was gone to bed she used to sit reading her book by candlelight. She drew up her knees under the sheets, resting her book upon them. Her story was about fairies and gnomes, and the gently-flowing moonlight of the narrative seemed to illumine the white pages, and she could hear in fancy fairy voices, so silent was the great many-roomed house, and so mellifluent were the words of the story. Presently she put out her candle, and, with a confused babel of voices close to her ear, and faint swift pictures before her eyes, she fell asleep.

And in the dead of night she arose out of bed in dream, and with eyes wide open yet seeing nothing of reality, moved silently through the vacant house. Past the room where her grandmother was snoring in brief, heavy slumber, she stepped light and surely, and down the wide staircase. And Vega the far-shining stood over against the window above the slate roof. Ann walked in the strange room as if she were being guided by the hand towards the oak chest. There, just as if she was dreaming it was her bed, she laid herself down in the old rose silk, in the fragrant place. But it was so dark in the room that the movement of the lid was indistinguishable.

Through the long day, the grandmother sat in her bow-window. Her lips were pursed, and she looked with dim, inquisitive scrutiny upon the street where people passed to and fro, and vehicles rolled by. At evening she climbed the stair and stood in the doorway of the large spare bedroom. The ascent had shortened her breath. Her magnifying spectacles rested upon her nose. Leaning her hand on the doorpost she peered in towards the glimmering square of window in the quiet gloom. But she could not see far, because her sight was dim and the light of day feeble. Nor could she detect the faint fragrance, as of autumnal leaves. But in her mind was a tangled skein of memories—laughter and tears, and little children now old-fashioned, and the advent of friends, and long farewells. And gossiping fitfully, inarticulately, with herself, the old lady went down again to her window-seat.

THE VATS

MANY years ago now—in that once upon a time which is the memory of the imagination rather than of the workaday mind, I went walking with a friend. Of what passed before we set out I have nothing but the vaguest recollection. All I remember is that it was early morning, that we were happy to be in one another's company, that there were bright green boughs overhead amongst which the birds floated and sang, and that the early dews still burned in their crystal in the sun.

We were taking our way almost at haphazard across country, there was now grass, now the faintly sparkling flinty dust of an English road, underfoot. With remarkably few humans to be seen, we trudged on, turning our eyes ever and again to glance laughingly, questioningly, or perplexedly at one another's, then slanting them once more on the blue-canopied countryside. It was Spring, in the month of May, I think, and we were talking of Time.

We speculated on what it was, and where it went to, touched in furtive tones on the Fourth Dimension and exchanged 'the Magic Formula.' We wondered if pigs could see time as they see the wind, and wished we could recline awhile upon those bewitching banks where it grows wild. We confessed to each other how of late we had been pining in our secret hearts for just a brief spell of an *eternity* of it. Time wherein we could be and think and dream all that each busy, hugger-mugger, feverish, precipitate twenty-four hours would not allow us to be or to think or dream. Im-

practicable, infatuate desire ! We desired to muse, to brood, to meditate, to embark (with a buoyant cargo) upon that quiet stream men call reverie. We had all but forgotten how even to sleep. We lay like Argus of nights with all our hundred eyes ajar.

There were books we should never now be able to read ; speculations we should never be able to explore ; riddles we should never so much as hear put, much less expounded. There were, above all, waking visions now past hoping for ; long since shut away from us by the stream of the hasty moments—as they tick and silt and slide irrecoverably away. In the gay folly of that bright morning we could almost have vowed there were even other “selves” awaiting us with whom no kind of precarious tryst we had ever made we had ever been faithful to. Perhaps they and we would be ready if only the world’s mechanical clocks would cease their trivial moralisings.

And memories—surely they would come arrowing home in the first of the evening to haunts serene and unmolested, if only the weather and mood and season and housing we could offer were decently propitious. We had frittered away, squandered so many days, weeks, years—and had saved so little. Spend-thrifts of the unborrowable, we had been living on our capital—a capital bringing in how meagre an “interest”—and were continually growing poorer. Once, when we were children, and in our own world, an hour had been as capacious as the blue bowl of the sky, and of as refreshing a milk. Now its successors haggardly snatched their way past our slatternly senses like thieves pursued.

Like an hour glass that cannot tell the difference between its head and its heels ; like a dial on a sunless day ; like a timepiece wound-up—wound-up and bereft of its pendulum ; so were we. Age, we had hideously learned, devours life as a river consumes flakes of the falling snow. Soon we should be beggars, with scarcely a month to our name ; and none to give us alms.

I confess that at this crisis in our talk I caught an uncomfortable glimpse of the visionary stallions of my hearse—ink-black streaming manes and tails—positively galloping me off—wreaths, glass, corpse and all, to keep their dismal appointment with the grave : and even at that, abominably late.

Indeed, our minds had at length become so profoundly engaged in these pictures and forebodings as we paced on, that a complete aeon might have meanwhile swept over our heads. We had talked ourselves into a kind of oblivion. Nor had either of us given the least thought to our direction or destination. We had been following not even so much as our noses. And then suddenly, we “came to.” Maybe it was the unwonted silence—a silence unbroken even by the harplike drone of noonday—that recalled us to ourselves. Maybe the air in these unfamiliar parts was of a crisper quality, or the mere effect of the strangeness around us had muttered in secret to our inward spirits. Whether or not, we both of us discovered at the same instant and as if at a signal, that without being aware of it, and while still our tongues were wagging on together on our old-fashioned theme, we had come into sight of the Vats. We looked up, and

Io!—they lay there in the middle distance, in cluster enormous under the cloudless sky : and here were we!

Imagine two age-scarred wolf-skinned humans of prehistoric days paddling along at shut of evening on some barbarous errand, and suddenly from a sweeping crest on Salisbury Plain descrying on the nearer horizon the awful monoliths of Stonehenge. An experience resembling that was ours this summer day.

We came at once to a standstill amid the far-flung stretches of the unknown plateau on which we had re-found ourselves, and with eyes fixed upon these astonishing objects, stood and stared. I have called them Vats. Vats they were not ; but rather sunken Reservoirs ; vast semi-spherical primeval Cisterns, of an area many times that of the bloated and swollen gasometers which float like huge flattened bubbles between earth and heaven under the sunlit clouds of the Thames. But no sunbeams disspread themselves here. They lay slumbering in a grave, crystal light, which lapped, deep as the Tuscarora Trough, above and around their prodigious stone plates, or slats, or slabs, or laminæ ; their steep slopes washed by the rarefied atmosphere of their site, and in hue of a hoary green.

As we gazed at them like this from afar they seemed to be in number, as I remember, about nine, but they were by no means all of a size. For one or two of the rotundas were smaller in compass than the others, just as there may be big snails or mushrooms in a family, and little ones.

But any object on earth of a majesty or magnitude that recalls the pyramids is a formidable spectacle.

And not a word passed between us, scarcely a glance, as with extreme caution and circumspection we approached—creeping human pace by pace—to view them nearer.

A fit of shivering came over me, I recollect, as thus advantaged I scanned their enormous sides, shaggy with tufts of a monstrous moss and scarred with yard-wide circumambulations of lichen. Gigantic grasses stooped their fatted seedpods from the least rough ledge. They might be walls of ice, so cold their aspect; or of a matter discoverable only in an alien planet.

Not—though they were horrific to the *eye*—not that they were in themselves appalling to the soul. Far rather they seemed to be emblems of an ineffable peace; harmless as, centuries before Noah, were the playing leviathans in a then privy Pacific. And when one looked close on them it was to see myriads of animated infinitesimals in crevice and cranny, of a beauty, hue and symmetry past eye to seize. Indeed, there was a hint remotely human in the looks of these Vats. The likeness between them resembled that between generations of mankind, countless generations old. Contemplating them with the unparalleled equanimity their presence at last bestowed, one might almost have ventured to guess their names. And never have I seen sward or turf so smooth and virginally emerald as that which heaved itself against their brobdingnagian flanks.

My friend and I, naturally enough, were acutely conscious of our minuteness of stature as we stood side by side in this unrecorded solitude, and, out of

our little round heads, peered up at them with our eyes. Obviously their muscous incrustations and the families of weeds flourishing in their interstices were of an age to daunt the imagination. Their ancestry must have rooted itself here when the dinosaur and the tribes of the megatherium roamed earth's crust and the pterodactyl clashed through its twilight—thousands of centuries before the green acorn sprouted that was to afford little Cain in a fallen world his first leafy petticoats. I realised as if at a sigh why smiles the Sphinx ; why the primary stars have blazed on in undiminishing midnight lustre during Man's brief history, and his childish constellations have scarcely by a single inch of heaven changed in their apparent stations.

They wore that air of lovely timelessness which decks the thorn, and haunts for the half-woken sense the odour of sweet-brier ; yet they were grey with the everlasting, as are the beards of the patriarchs and the cindery craters of the Moon. Theirs was the semblance of having been lost, forgotten, abandoned, like some founder'd Nereid-haunted derelict of the first sailors, rotting in dream upon an undiscovered shore. They hunched their vast shapes out of the green beneath the sunless blue of space, and for untrodden leagues around them stretched like a paradisal savanna what we poor thronging clock-vexed men call Silence. Solitude.

In telling of these Vats it is difficult to convey in mere words even a fraction of their effect upon our minds. And not merely our minds. They called to some hidden being within us that, if not their coeval,

was, at least aware of their exquisite antiquity. Whether of archangelic or daemonic construction, clearly they had remained unvisited by mortal man for as many centuries at least as there are cherries in Damascus or beads in Tierra del Fuego. Sharers of this thought, we two dwarf visitors had whispered an instant or so together, face to face ; and then were again mute.

Yes, we were of one mind about that. In the utmost depths of our imaginations it was clear to us that these supremely solitary objects, if not positively cast out of thought, had been abandoned.

But by whom ? My friend and I had sometimes talked of the divine Abandoner ; and also (if one can, and may, distinguish between mood and person, between the dream and the dreamer) of It. Here was the vacancy of His presence ; just as one may be aware of a filament of His miracle in the smiling beauty that hovers above the swaying grasses of an indecipherable grave-stone.

Looking back on the heatless and rayless noonday of those Vats, I see, as I have said, the mere bodies of my friend and me, the upright bones of us, indescribably dwarfed by their antediluvian monstrosity. Yet within the lightless bellies of these sarcophagi were heaped up, we were utterly assured (though how, I know not) floods, beyond measure, of the waters for which our souls had pined. Waters, imaginably so clear as to be dense, as if of melted metal more translucent even than crystal ; of such a tenuous purity that not even the moonlit branches of a dream would spell their reflex in them ; so costly, so far

beyond price, that this whole stony world's rubies and sapphires and amethysts of Mandalay and Guadalajara and Solikamsk, all the treasure-houses of Cambalech and the booty of King Tamburlane would suffice to purchase not one drop.

It is indeed the unseen, the imagined, the untold-of, the fabulous, the forgotten that alone lies safe from mortal moth and rust ; and these Vats—their very silence held us spellbound, as were the Isles before the Sirens sang.

But how, it may be asked ; No sound ? No spectral tread ? No faintest summons ? And not the minutest iota of a superscription ? None. I sunk my very being into nothingness, so that I seemed to become but a shell receptive of the least of whispers. But the multitudinous life that was here was utterly silent. No sigh, no ripple, no pining chime of rilling drop within. Waters of life ; but infinitely still.

I may seem to have used extravagant terms. My friend and I used none. We merely stood in dumb survey of these crusted, butt-like domes of stone, wherein slept *Elixir Vitæ*, whose last echo had been the Choragium of the morning stars.

God knows there are potent explosives in these latter days. My friend and I had merely the nails upon our fingers, a pen-knife and a broken pair of scissors in our pockets. We might have scraped seven and seventy score growths of a Nebuchadnezzar's talons down to the quick, and yet have left all but unmarked and unscarred those mossed and monstrous laminæ. But we had tasted the untastable, and were refreshed in spirit at least a little more durably

than are the camel-riders of the Sahara dream-ridden by mirage.

We knew now and for ever that Time-pure *is* ; that here—somewhere awaiting us and all forlorn mankind—lay hid the solace of our mortal longing ; that doubtless the Seraph whose charge is the living waters will in the divine hour fetch down his iron key in his arms, and—well, Dives, rich man and crumb-waster that he was, pleaded out of the flames for but one drop of them. Neither my friend nor I was a Dives then, nor was ever likely to be. And now only I remain.

We were Children of Lazarus, ageing, footsore, dusty and athirst. We smiled openly and with an extraordinary gentle felicity at one another—his eyes and mine—as we turned away from the Vats.

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